Writing Saskatchewan

20 CRITICAL ESSAYS

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Aritha Van Herk
Fred Wah
Rudy Wiebe
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edited by
Kenneth G. Probert

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20 Critical Essays

Edited by Kenneth G. Probert

Canadian Plains Research Center
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Kenneth G. Probert
Regina
March 1989

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Introduction

KENNETH G. PROBERT

When writers speak nostalgically about "summers at the Fort," they identify themselves as former students or instructors at the Saskatchewan School of the Arts. Under the auspices of the Saskatchewan Arts Board, the school has been operating since 1967 at Fort San, once a major tuberculosis sanatorium, in the Qu'Appelle Valley. To mark the school's twentieth year, a symposium on Saskatchewan writing was held at the Fort June 18 to 21, 1987. The essays in this volume are edited versions of twenty of the papers presented that weekend.

Much that made the four days memorable is missing in this printed record. The reader cannot *hear* Simone Vauthier as she reads Edna Alford, or Russell McDougall as he compares the sounds of Australian and Saskatchewan poetry, or Patrick Lane as he invokes credos from his fellow writers, or Aritha Van Herk as she seduces Saskatchewan. Post-session discussion and gossip have not been transcribed here, so the reader also misses the tension that developed between the critics and the writers (though it should be noted that virtually all the participating Canadian academic critics are also accomplished creative writers). To some extent the tension was expected, even invited, by the symposium organizers. While Saskatchewan writing has flourished in the past decade or so, little of it has been subjected to real criticism and public evaluation. Many participants and observers continued to believe either that the writing is not yet ready for such scrutiny, or that it does not benefit from criticism, but most seemed to be thoroughly won over by the visiting foreign scholars, McDougall and Vauthier. Their papers came late in the symposium and demonstrated conclusively that criticism can be a sympathetic and complementary art. Edna Alford said later that Vauthier's paper was uncanny: it was as if the critic had been inside her head when she was writing her story.

The papers, of course, are a mixed lot. Many of the writers issue what amount to statements of poetics, some survey past strengths or weaknesses in Saskatchewan writing and suggest future directions, and many of the critics contribute to the slowly growing body of criticism on prairie, particularly Saskatchewan, writing.[1]

As might be expected, there emerges no consensus concerning Saskatchewan writing. In fact, many participants doubt that such an entity exists. They agree with Patrick Lane's assertion that there is only writing which happens to have been composed in the province. There also seems to be widespread agreement that whatever is now the central preoccupation of Saskatchewan's literature, it is not the landscape. The thread that does run through these papers more than any other is the question, or issue, of the vernacular in Saskatchewan writing. Perhaps that is why the most often cited literary theorist in these pages is Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work provides the framework with which to talk about the many voices in literary words.[2]

Readers of these pages will no doubt note the absence of some voices. Symposium participants were quick to point out that there were too few women among the major presenters, that there were no sessions on non-fiction or children's literature, and that there seemed to be no place on the programme where non-white writers might be discussed. Someone looking for a critical project might do worse than to ask how these apparent lacunae came about and how the situation might change during a thirtieth anniversary symposium.

NOTES

1. This collection thus joins earlier ones: Dennis Cooley, ed., *RePlacing* (Downsview: ECW Press, 1981); Birk Sproxton, ed., *Trace: Prairie Writers on Writing* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1986); E.F. Dyck, ed., *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing* (Regina: Saskatchewan Writers Guild, 1986).
2. See, in particular, his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), and *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

Reading Saskatchewan Poetry: An Australian Short Story

RUSSELL McDOUGALL

When I accepted the challenge to comment on recent Saskatchewan poetry, I did not pretend to be an expert in the field. In fact, I had not even heard of most of its writers. That by itself is hardly surprising, as Vincent Buckley, also an Australian, has explained:

> The English-speaking world is divided up between the two great publishing empires, England and America. We are, broadly speaking, in the English sphere and you are, broadly speaking, in the American sphere. So we can't get Canadian books.[1]

I know, too, from personal experience how difficult it can be to persuade Canadian publishers that it is worthwhile sending titles for review to Australian magazines and journals; they consider their market as restricted, closer to "home." The financial considerations often have a political context. Whose poetry is it, anyway? For whom is it written? To whom does it speak?

No doubt Canadians have answers to these questions. But, out of my cultural blindness, some more peculiar insight may develop. My way of reading Saskatchewan writing is somehow different—simply because I am Australian, reading from outside the received traditions of Canadian literature, and not holding to the cultural codes and values from which, consciously or unconsciously, the literature derives. By engaging in cross-cultural dialogue I am breaking through the "block formations" of publishing empires, and also, by implication, subverting the cultural codes of conquest that haunt and repress us on opposite sides of the globe.[2] The marginalization of the region, by Sydney or Toronto, Melbourne or Ottawa, can be seen as a systematic repetition of the centralized colonial order which sought from the outset to prevent Australia and Canada from mutual regard and relation: comparison, judgement, and evaluation were the prerogative of Empire. We were to compete for attention and so, paradoxically, to conserve our energies as subjects of the master discourse, rather than to engage in complex exchange and interaction. Even now it is dif-

ficult for Australians and Canadians to read one another's writing; but we are at least agreed that it is worth the risk.

I have decided not to present an argument that is the product of completed reading, but rather to discuss the process of reading Saskatchewan poetry out of its normative contexts, and to consider something of the range of reading strategies that become available through this displacement. There are at least two reasons for adopting this metacritical approach: (1) I assume that behind the invitation of an Australian critic to a symposium on Saskatchewan writing is the recognition of what we share as well as the ways in which we differ—that is, the historical legacy of colonialism; (2) The burden of this common inheritance is our mutual struggle "to discover a new reading position or point of view" from which the literatures of both Canada and Australia make a new kind of sense.[3] A third reason might be this: I do not wish to obscure my own situation—it is one of displacement and deferral of cultural identity. In the process of reading Saskatchewan poetry, I move gradually out of my own national context, edging tentatively toward an investigation of the blank space at the centre of an Australian-Canadian dialogue. And yet my escape from conditioned bias can only be partial, as the process is one of infinite rehearsal.

Not knowing how to read this poetry, I begin with exoticism. I find the signs of the prairie: in Patrick Lane, in Lorna Crozier, in Andrew Suknaski, in Elizabeth Allen, in Anne Szumigalski, the signs are everywhere. And—surprise, surprise—the landscape they create is a space where I have never been before. I expected this; and it pleases me. So, what's wrong with that?

In the "Elite" series of *Waiting for Saskatchewan* Fred Wah speaks of "the relief of . . . exotic identity"[4]—somewhat ironically, because, after all, *who* is relieved? The particular content of *Waiting for Saskatchewan* is the "father," and the correspondences of place and person obviously refer to origins. There is guilt, and there is nostalgia: Wah has moved away from Saskatchewan; his father is dead. He is actively interpreting his past; but he is also passively waiting for it to speak to him. His father has no voice in this poetry. He never speaks, except that his silence is the sign of his identity: born in China, resident in Saskatchewan. Wah says: "'Eth' is ethic and ethnic and ethos. Ethos is home."[5] In a sense, this explains how, paradoxically, "home" *can* be exotic: "In the particularity of a place the writer finds revealed the correspondences of a whole world."[6] Wah is interpreting, in the manner of Eli Mandel's "dreaming backwards" out of exile, actively deciphering the signs of his father's absence and the loss of Saskatchewan.[7] On the other hand, he is passively waiting—

without guilt, without nostalgia—moving beyond the dream of presence. To put this in another way: in part he is trying to recuperate a transparent subject—Saskatchewan, his father—trying to deal with displacement; and yet this must involve a constant deferral of identity. Just as the father's identity had constantly to be deferred because he never fitted in, could never be defined *in* Saskatchewan, so now the son, displaced *from* Saskatchewan, has constantly to defer his writing the story of *his* life. A double play: interpretation as waiting.[8] By contrastive analogy, I come to realize that my own interpretation of the exoticism of Saskatchewan poetry is naïvely single-minded and self-serving.

Exoticism is projected hermeneutically by the reader and is self-consolidating: it makes "writing Saskatchewan" a transparent subject, assimilating and so appropriating the "region" precisely in the manner of Anglo-American critical tradition. Saskatchewan poetry becomes "regional in the sense of being ex-centric,"[9] as the reading self confirms his or her own position at the centre ("home is where the heart is"). Adopting this reading position amounts to nothing more or less than repeating the error of Empire: that is, assuming a central point of view from which evaluations can be made and, coincidentally, a normative central tradition created, whereby "ex-centric" texts can only make eccentric sense—the non-sense of exotica. This kind of relief is that of a fortress mentality.

The problem remains, though, even after I reject my first reading position: there are voices that, try as I may, I cannot hear. And so many poems I have read from Saskatchewan *give* the poem, in part at least, to a folk voice or character, a voice literally of the people, or to a series of voices. I cannot *hear* Jimmy Hoy and the other inhabitants of Wood Mountain, not properly.[10] I do not know their language, I do not know the constitutive patterns of their speech, the syntactic and semantic rules. Nor am I familiar with its pragmatic aspects, the conversational and contextual rules of utterance. I do not know the diverse rhetorical codes of the ethnic mix that is Saskatchewan, and these, of course, are the basis of the literary codes upon which the poetry of the region establishes itself. Rejecting exoticism, I am tempted to read Jimmy Hoy into some kind of equivalence with Chinese Australians, not that they have much of a voice in Australian writing. Yet I know that such equivalence is false, nothing to do with the poetry (or not much). Even the voicing of poems not given to the vernacular is an aural problem, because I do not know the rules of delivery. Australian poets, who do not generally have the funding to get much practice at reading in public, tend towards a laconic concept of delivery, and this is often encoded in

their poetry by various figural modes and stylistic conventions. Listen to this first of Les Murray's "The Grassfire Stanzas":

> August, and black centres expand on the afternoon paddock.
> Dilating on a match in widening margins, they lift
> a splintering murmur; they fume out of used-up grass
> that's been walked, since summer, into infinite swirled licks.[11]

Or the first stanza of Dorothy Hewett's "This Time":

> The rain falls, the wind
> blows in the canyons of the University.
> Drinking with the Professor of English
> behind the plate-glass windows
> the last crocus is whipped to death.[12]

The style of delivery is rather self-conscious; whereas in North America I often hear (or imagine I hear) variations on a bardic, incantatory voice. In Suknaski:

> suknaskyj listens
> to what the dry grass speaks
> in the vernacular of wind
> across prairie
> *. . .who is this sleek cat invading*
> *like a memory*
> *the barnyard of youth?*[13]

In Anne Campbell:

> The well
> was a story
> picture in a book
>
> logs made the base
> an arc held the crank
>
> milk was in the pail
> my grandfather
> slowly wound down
> hot July
> afternoons

he said: don't touch the rope
never touch the pail
the worst thing is the risk
contaminating

the well
draws me

knowledge
to the fall[14]

I could give other examples—from Mandel, Lane, Newlove, Doris Hillis, Glen Sorestad—but am I hearing their poetry as I should? This is my problem. In fact I have chosen these examples from Suknaski and Campbell because each ostensibly contains two *different* voices, and I cannot hear the difference.

In Suknaski's text there is a character who listens, not speaking: his name is Suknaskyj. He is listening in the manner of Wah's waiting for Saskatchewan, listening to the dry grass of the prairie. The grass speaks, in the language of the wind, a language of deferral it seems: the wind speaks, *through* the grass. But the voice of grass and wind is indistinguishable from the framing poetic voice. In response, I find myself sliding toward another reading position, one that would develop this slippage in the text as a significant and central absence of security: that of destabilized voice, self-undermining voice. From this point of view the two voices—one and the same, and yet double—can be seen as two interpretations, similar to the active and passive dis/engagement of Wah's poetry I mentioned earlier: one denies the origins of voice and of poem, the other deciphers them. The impossibility of distinguishing the one from the other is what sets the text in motion. In the resulting free play, the poem can go on and on forever, like Saskatchewan, like the psyche. The poem is able to coexist with the place and the person (the prairie-poet), rather than pulling Suknaski and his phenomenal world into the text or going out *to* them *from* it. This kind of correspondence becomes much more important in the poems that feel their way in the dark toward the native, poems in which the absence of ventriloquism is crucial to a strategy of dis/inventing power, where the internal relations of the text are very consciously recognized as operating within a field of power. The point has been made by Jack Healy:

> It has to do with the densities of a particular place, Western Canada, which islands people and events in large spaces without swallowing them or synthesizing them.

> In this way the events of Riel, Big Bear, Sitting Bull, Crowfoot and Poundmaker, and later events like Rudy Wiebe, John Newlove and Andrew Suknaski being born there, coexist, cohabit. Eventually, with a shyness careful of what cannot be said, these events correspond. Not the correspondence of the Brébeuf-Baudelaire kind that exists in the reversible, symbolic worlds of that Eastern genesis, but a sending of letters across the distance of time, jostling the same place.[15]

Similarly, in Campbell's "Pine Poems," an inability to distinguish the voice of grandfather from the framing poetic voice leads me eventually to adopt a reading position from which I can activate a play of difference within the apparently unified voice, to engage in a reading process that will motivate the *latent* self-contesting of the textual *structures* of voice. The framing voice is in the first-person, and the narrative that constructs this voice is one of lost innocence:

> the well
>
> draws me
>
> knowledge
> to the fall

Grandfather is the third-person voice from the past:

> he said:
> don't touch the rope
> never touch the pail
> the worst thing is the risk

Since this has the sound of a bardic voice, *both* voices must be associated with knowledge. But what does the word "knowledge," in this double voicing, signify? The risk of which grandfather warns is the risk of contamination: a pailful of milk, lowered into the cooling water of the well for storage, must not be spilled: this is the literal risk of the fall:

> nine year old arms
> skinny
> can't control the crank

Ah, but grandfather *is* a crank: "don't touch . . . /never touch . . ." Grandfather is the worst kind of hypocrite, extremely touchy, yet with the overpowering

touch of inescapable "arms." Contamination is incest, the sexual molestation of a nine-year-old girl:

> milk whitens
> water in the well

The telescopic nature of the imagery here, in the final lines, hints at the awful hallucination of a sexually abused child being thrown down the well: a quick trip from "knowledge/to the fall." Grandfather's knowledge is biblical: no wonder his voice is bardic. Structurally, too, his voice is contaminating: it divides the narrative of the female voice and fragments the female persona. He shadows her, ominously, repressively, making her identify with his perspective, murderously.

The reading position at this point in my story is a structuralist one: transcoding a single invariable,[16] the Grand Father. But I am unhappy with this, because it constitutes the text as a "block formation," locked forever within the repressive codes of patriarchy. It is only by taking a deconstructive turn that I might arrive at a feminist reading, one that will resist the authority of the grandfather, undermine the authority of a "fortress text."[17] So I return to the point about prairie poetry not adopting an *attitude* to its subject(s): Healy's point, that the text is neither drawn toward the native, for example, as the object of confident (imperial) scrutiny, nor draws the native into its own field as the subject of discourse. In Campbell's poem I read the "drawing" of the well as a trope that defers the meaning of subjection in precisely this way.

The "story" of the well begins as a "picture in a book," so that, by implication, the opening of the narrative is the drawing of the well. At the centre of the narrative where the fall occurs, the framing female voice says: "the well/draws me." At least three meanings of the verb "to draw" are now in operation. The one established at the beginning is child's play, drawing in a picture book. When the child herself is later drawn, the female voice may seem to lose control of the narrative; but in fact, if she is drawn to fall (with the focus on the well), then the play is one of difference; drawing a well is a movement in the opposite direction to falling down one. In this way, speaking double, the framing female voice moves grandfather out of the centre, and establishes a blank space there, so that the meaning of the poem (the authority of the text) is deferred constantly from one level to another. The permanent authority of one-way contamination becomes a constant two-way slippage. In this reading, from a post-structuralist

position, the latent difference of the two voices in the text is activated as a play of difference in order to fissure the "block formation" of the text: that is, here, to exorcise the male authority at its centre.

I have spent rather a long time on the problem of voice in my hypothetically Australian reading of Saskatchewan poetry. Generally speaking, the experience of reading, of interpretation *is* "the experience of an utterance."[18] But the experience of the "exotic" makes the utterance particularly problematic, whether it be Canadian or Caribbean, African or Australian. In Saskatchewan poetry the problem is even more particularized, as the reader becomes aware of the often self-conscious coincidence of voice and vision. The interaction of voices, or of an apparently single voice with its own inscribed sense of difference, with silence—this is often the *subject* of "Saskatchewan" in writing of the region, rather than a description of formal method. Perhaps this has something to do with the ethnic complexity of the cultural codings. And perhaps it has to do with geography: a poetics of labyrinthine voice overcoding the various self-contradicting conceptual structures of the prairie space: empty/mapped; land/ocean; constant/moving; continuous/discontinuous. But we have similar competing discourses in Australia—between island and continent, beach and bush, the presence and absence of Centre—that have not coincided with embracing postmodernism. In conversations with Robert Wilson and Shirley Neuman, Robert Kroetsch invents *Labyrinths of Voice* as a title to describe a national rather than a prairie poetics.[19] But, if technique is central to the production of Canadian identity, as Arthur Kroker suggests, a possible Saskatchewan permutation is to translate technique as voice, so that the production of "Saskatchewan" is in the voice of a *technical* regionalism.[20] At least, this seems to be one way of reading the relation of voice to vision in the poetry of the region.

For example:

> watching the sun
> watching the sun's wheel
> great slow metaphors
> wheel toward me out of the sun
>
> they take my eyes from my head
> they place my eyes on rocks
> they take my crying tongue
> they wheel back toward the sun
> their black hands carrying my name[21]

The technique of the voice here is muted, an utterance once again issuing out of silence under pressure of patience: a disclosure of speech deferred. The sun becomes a wheel, the simplest of metaphors. The progress of the poem is slow, an unravelling in space of this single metaphor which implies all possible relationships, all things under the sun. From the single trope of "the sun's wheel" the discourse doubles, and becomes self-conscious: figures of speech themselves are wheeling, out of the sun, to collapse universally the distinction between object and subject. As the eyes of the speaker are placed on rocks, his "crying" tongue is taken back to the sun, wheeling still. In the act of placing, voice and vision correspond; and, technically speaking, the form of the utterance "provides its own identity in a never-ending circular loop of information load and feed-back"—the way that Kroker characterizes the operation of "the Canadian Discourse" on society: "how we are worked and reworked within the medium of modern technology."[22] The same process, the same ironic correspondences of voice and vision, are summarized in Mandel's poetic treatment of silence:

> when he put out his eyes
> he said: I have said everything
>
> you will not hear my voice again[23]

It's there again in Lorna Crozier's poem, too:

> Close your eyes for a moment,
> listen:
> the floorboards groan at your mother's step,
> bread pans scrape the oven grate,
> her fingers tap the crust.
> Where are you now?
> Pretending to sleep in another room
> where windows turn dreams to frost[24]

And in Judith Krause's poetry I cannot help but notice the amount of talk there is about talk: "all the comings and goings (& goings on)."[25]

Gossip, rumour, spreading the news: in Krause's poetry the talk implies a female oral tradition, through which women (transparent subjects in the dominant social discourse) constitute and signify their own presence. In the fo!-

lowing quotation, from "The Women in the Family," the men are literally placed in brackets, "to golf or snooze in a hammock," while:

> The women talk incessantly.
> Even the ones who aren't there
> make their presence felt.
> The aunt who drinks too much.
> The sister whose marriage is breaking up.[26]

The narrative occasion of these poems is often carnivalesque, in the sense of something happening as it is being talked about.[27] For example, grandmother comes to visit; she talks and talks and talks, telling "all the news of her small town," but this is narrated in the third-person as the occasion for a first-person meditation on life and death, normally elevated themes, here lowered to the level of the everyday event —that is, transferred to the physical level of earth and body. It is not an uncontaminated site of female solidarity, however, this oral intertext: there is the shadow of the female poet, for example, in "Killing the Angel in the House":

> A clean house is a holy house,
> she likes to sing in her low voice
> to the tune of her favourite hymn.
> Anything to distract you
> bring you back to her
> world of cooking and cleaning.[28]

The angel of the house is a corrupt female muse, a subject constituted by male poetic discourse so that she identifies with the interests of her oppressors. She who has the wings creates only the untidy house on which she harps, for whenever the poet sits down to write:

> she will pout
> drag her wings across the rug
> leaving a trail of dustballs
> and dead moths in her wake.

Or she whispers in the poet's ear:

> your floors are dirty
> your cupboards are bare

These lines in the angel's voice, despite their being framed by another *poetic* voice, activate a play of difference. From my point of view, they are a citation from the oral text:

> Ladybird, ladybird,
> Fly away home,
> Your house is on fire
> Your children are gone.[29]

The end of the poem, then, is necessarily self-contesting:

> There's nothing an angel hates more
> than the smell of singed feathers.

If the ladybird's children are gone and her house is burning, perhaps the "burning candles" on the poet's desk have caught the text and put an end to its creation. It is impossible to know who is lured into silence at the end, despite the assertion that it is the angel. Citation from the vernacular has contaminated the site; and yet this is crucial. The angel cannot really be killed, not without the suicide of the poet, for each contains the trace of the other and equally inscribes the ethos of the utterance that is the poem: "Contamination is the signature that asserts the writer's identity . . . Opening the site is both a revelation and a violation."[30]

The matter of vernacular voicing continues to be a focus of hot debate, the terms of which are "flat" versus "high" poetry. It is a little like the "Big" and "Little Endian" debate, but particularly interesting to a reader operating in the "hypothetical" Australian mode. "High" poetry "privileges the elegant, the erudite, the allusive, the exotic"; "flat" poetry is vernacular, a revalued and revisionist mode of poetic discourse, as Dennis Cooley would have it, struggling "To get out from under the smother of an official culture that is important and 'high'."[31] The procedures of "high" poetry are rarely in need of defence, since they are so well established as to have the stamp of authority: they prohibit the rude, the homely and the vulgar as "unpoetical."[32] In this way the history of the development of "high" poetry becomes a "narrative of mastery," with its own hermeneutic programme, inscribing the reader in a system of values which prohibits serious consideration of the vernacular as "poetical." As a representation of cultural hegemony, this programme is obviously Anglocentric; but Cooley implies that there has been a transfer of power to Eastern Canada, a

recentring of empire that is manifested by institutional domination and control of the regional voices of the prairies:

> Hence the strategy of bringing the oral into the poem. It marks the seeking of a usable discourse in a colonized world . . . It means refusing the presented terms or the given boundaries of poetry. Instead, we construct other routes, seek new discourses, which reconstitute the poem beyond any capacity to enforce consent. One major resistance comes through the defiant and joyous sounding of voices which in the past have been considered noisy or subliterary. Now, celebrated in poetry, they become eminently sub-versive.[33]

I know from the poetry I have been reading that not all prairie poets will agree with this characterization of the debate. But, moving within their own "invisible network of value-categories,"[34] many Australians would find the little Canadian poetry that they stumble upon (mainly "eastern" poetry) too "high"—too formalized in its stylistic emphasis, too refined and rarefied, too artificial and unearthly—a "high"/wire act. And I know that Canadian readers sometimes find Australian poetry "disgustingly rough"—crude and artless, lacking a sense of style. So Cooley's argument would find a natural audience in Australia—were it not for the fact that he might seem to be defending a *fait accompli*. It is the embattled nature of the position from which he speaks that seems foreign to me. The popular verse tradition has been much more influential in Australia than in Canada, infiltrating the struggling academic tradition at an early stage and in a lasting manner. The reasons for this are both social and geographical: there is the class composition of the Australian prison-colony to consider alongside the Canadian pattern of settlement; and there is also the shock of dis/location, much more profound in Australia than in Canada. The strange discoveries of Australian flora and fauna which helped precipitate the collapse of the Great Chain of Being as a conceptual framework for the hierarchical ordering of Creation gave impetus as well to dismantling the system of genres which classified forms and modes of poetry. The confusion of genres in early Australian poetry provides some gauge of a colonial effort to come to terms with the extreme shock of New World circumstance; and out of this confusion there evolves a concept of the vernacular that is much more broadly based than even Cooley's dictionary definition will allow. When Les Murray entitles his volume of selected poems *The Vernacular Republic*, he anticipates for his Australian reader a conjunction of ideological and linguistic attitudes that is so entrenched in the mainstream of Australian poetic tradition that his poetry need

not proclaim its "contra"/diction. The rough may underscore the well-turned gnomic phrase, and that will be the pleasure of the poetry.[35] In other words, the vernacular goes way beyond the colloquial, and is more of an attitude than a style, one that embraces all the resources of the national dialect of Australian English. The vernacular, as I see it, is no more crucial to Murray's "baroque" diction than it is, say, to David Campbell's pastoral quietude or Dorothy Hewett's romantic extravagance. There are, of course, other voices, other commitments, too many to consider here. But the vernacular muse, who seems to inspire quite a number of Saskatchewan poets (Geoffrey Ursell, Barbara Sapergia and others), would not need to be defended in Australia against the priests of "high" culture. And if there is less of hardened "high" convention it may be that there will be more capacity for cross-cultural dialogue. After all, the vernacular muse *is* the spirit of cultural heterogeneity.

I need to stress that this is a story I am telling. The issues at stake in the debate about the nature of poetry are in fact at stake in the process of reading. My own story of reading projects this into a difference between Australian and Canadian interpretative communities, in the hope of providing a useful point of reference for discussion; but in reality, of course, reading is just as heterogeneous as community.[36] In the terms of my narrative, this debate arose out of consideration of some of the oral elements of Saskatchewan poetry. In a much more objectified account, Laurence Ricou establishes a connection between oral constructions and the role of memory.

> The poets are seeking a sense of the past, trying to "call up" the "long dead legends," trying to establish the ascendance of the imagination in an unimaginative world. In pursuing this, they naturally look to the oral quality of legend as a guide to their language and style.[37]

That memory has a major role to play is obvious; it is linked with the concept of "dreaming backwards" and with patience as a mode of interpretation. But, since my own narrative has utilized the debate about vernacular as a means to establish some context for cross-cultural dialogue, I would like now to offer an account of memory that derives specifically from our common inheritance of postcolonialism. This in turn might help to revise the moral argument that seems to have skewed a number of Canadian responses to Patrick Lane's poetry. For this reason, although it has nothing to do with memory (*because* it has nothing to do with memory), it is useful to recall George Bowering's pronouncement:

> Often it is hard to see the point of yet another picture of pain and ugly mistreatment of the soft, but one suspects that it is this: now you languorous book-reading city folks are going to seem something of the real world. Still, after the first handful of dismembered pets, one gets rather used to seeing bits of birds and kittens around. They have not been transformed by the imagination, but presented sequentially, the way pornography works.[38]

A more useful approach to the "decadence" of Lane's imagery might be to adopt a deconstructive reading position: more specifically, to focus upon dis/memberment in terms of its difference from the constitutive play of memory.

The colonial experience of exile, of geographical and social dislocation, can be considered metaphorically in its relation to the body politic of Empire as an experience of dismemberment. In the Caribbean, for those who descended through the Middle Passage into slavery, the displacement was doubled, the dismemberment extreme, as family members were separated and tribal affinities dismantled. But out of this experience, on ships so crowded with bodies that the slaves felt themselves literally dismembered, was born the dance of limbo, which can be seen as a ritual enactment and transformation of that dismemberment: "They had to create some kind of dance which would give them an opportunity to play that dismemberment, to make a game of that dismemberment, and on the other hand to put themselves together again."[39] The dance becomes a symbolic breaking and re-making of the body; and the implications for the body politic, as the authorities were dimly aware, are subtly subversive. The limbo connection reminds us that making must also involve breaking, and we see this in the attitude to language in much Caribbean poetry, where dislocation is often the principle of re-ordering perception. The "limbo perspective" can provide a perceptual framework for the re-vision of postcolonial writing. In Saskatchewan poetry, it seems to me, the world is remade not through the agency of memory as such, since this is a selective process, but rather through a process of what I would call re/memberment, a re-ordering of the received reality of dis/memberment. Re/memberment re-programmes the functioning of memory so that it will call forth a whole new conception of the world, and of the place of the person within this world.

The tropes of dis/memberment, then, are not unexpected, in poetry that tackles the problem of disinheritance and absence of identity. And surely this is the area that Lane discovers, by a kind of archaeological re/memberment of what he calls "a history of death."[40] Lane's adherence to the Aesthetic "religion of beauty" and his development of the Decadent doctrine of moral subversion and

sensual derangement are very obvious. But the blow that slices the body into parts, that alienates one part of the world from another, male from female, Self from Other, or that dislocates the conscious and the unconscious mind, does not only dis/member; it simultaneously "shapes the monument in the seed" (as Wilson Harris says), for it is the stroke of genesis: the blow that dis/members also provides the occasion for re/memberment.[41] The cut of dis/memberment is obviously the cause of pain, too, a state of consciousness unlike any other, since pain "has no referential content": like music, "it is not *of* or *for* anything."[42] Again, like music, pain is form in solution: a continual striving toward total resolution, death and/or transfiguration. This is the problem of pain, and it is intricately bound up with the problem of power. As Elaine Scarry has recently demonstrated:

> The failure to express pain . . . will always work to allow its appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power [such as torture and war]; conversely, the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation.[43]

Scarry's argument is that, by revealing the political consequences that are at stake in the "inexpressibility" of pain, we can begin "to expose by inversion the essential character of 'expressibility,' whether verbal or material."[44] In other words, pain can be a key to understanding the nature of creation. The nihilism of Lane's poetry, I think, takes a similarly deconstructive turn, depending on one's reading position.

In "Old Mother," for example, which is the opening invocation for the whole sequence of "Prairie Poems," the process of re/memberment is imaged forth in a dream of "Small flowers of blood"—a fusion of death and birth from which "silence speaks." The invocation concludes:

> I keep the point of your talon
> deep in my heart.[45]

But this point corresponds to the point of the pen—and to the point of the poem, which is therefore ambivalent. Blood artifice: the heart is the spring of blood as it is of poetry. The same fissuring of "block formations" of violence occurs throughout the "Prairie Poems" sequence. The second poem, "Buffalo Stones," begins by presenting us with an image of terrifying closure:

> This river was a wall to the wandering buffalo
> who drifted here in the last of summers
> before turning back to graze their way south
> into the American guns and the hunters
> who shipped their tongues to the east.[46]

What makes this closure and dis/memberment worse is that it is not only geographical but also historical, the image of a blocked order of history, a self-perpetuating history of death and traumatized silence:

> On the brooding hills above the blue
> great stones remain. Around their base
> wallows curve in deep depressions.

The state of mind that this colonial history bequeaths is, to say the least, one of "deep" and convoluted "depressions." But there are ways out of a closed mind.

The reader, as a stranger to the text, finds these escape routes by reading against the grain of syntax and narrative and the sequential structures of dis/memberment and/or "pornography," paying attention instead to particular words that might open as windows upon the relational process that frames these structures.[47] Take the final movement of "Buffalo Stones":

> Above this river a child slides a stone
> and does not know his long smooth falling
> is a history of death, his breath
> a breaking that the wind will steal.
> But I, who wish to speak with history,
> will sing of this though kingbirds cry
> and coyotes move like ghosts
> across the rolling grasslands.
> There is nothing to atone, there is
> only a dreaming, a child climbing,
> and a man above a river who still feels
> the heart's revenge, the grieving and the earth
> falling like a smooth stone into darkness.

The word that first begins to frame this movement for me is "slides." I would link it with "rolling," an action conventionally applied to "stone" in association with the idea of illumination and freedom from bondage: roll away the stone! The word "slides" assimilates as well in sound with the word that would

describe dis/memberment—"slices"—in aural combination with "glides," which might describe the movement of a stone across water or a bird across land, as opposed to a falling movement. This complex of aural and semantic association frames my reading of the final line, where the words "falling," "smooth" and "stone" reappear. It enables me to read the flight of stone as an arc that illumines darkness as it falls into it, an arc of re-vision or re-memberment, making as well as breaking the world. In support of this reading, I would draw attention to the word "atone" as a compound opposed to dis/memberment—at/one. And I would point to the use of enjambment to undermine closure in the poem, where the line breaks constantly alter the expectations established by the idiom. Cooley discusses the principle behind this way of breaking the line as follows: "When the line edges coincide with expressions that seem to stop at those same boundaries, the subsequent discovery, after that first falling into place, is unusually capricious."[48] What I notice in one line, then, is the balancing of "breath" against "death"; only subsequently do I read "breath/a breaking." In another line, balanced against the nihilist utterance "There is nothing to atone" is the bardic statement of being, "there is." And I absorb the meaning of "a man above a river who still feels" before the attenuation of the next line's "revenge" and "grieving."

This kind of play with the expectations of a line functions ironically to disestablish the closure of meaning: it is the play of making and breaking—in thematic terms, the play of dis/memberment and re/memberment—each of these being crucial to the process of creation.

Geoffrey Ursell takes up these same issues in his "Love of Beaver" series in *Trap Lines*. The method, however, is different, a strange and exciting blend of documentary narrative, magical realism, allegory and parody—each of which has been claimed as a revisionary mode of postcolonial discourse. The theme of dis/memberment is obvious in its reference to "trap lines," a title which anticipates the subject of the fur trade. But the environmentalist perspective, when we come to it, is voiced by natives—and this expands the frame of reference in which we are to read of violence and exploitation.[49] There are poems here, for instance, that play upon the meaning of "beaver" in male slanguage in order to bring into focus an allegorical reading that is concerned with the entrapment and victimization of women. Images of dis/memberment undergo creative distortion through the ironic doubling of language; the title itself is doubly heuristic, for it refers not only to the subjects of Ursell's poetry but also to the "lines" that inevitably break and make it. This doubling feeds into allegory as a means for

revising "pornographic" perspectives, for revising "his/story" itself. It also feeds into the magical realism of poems like "Evils upon the Land" and "Castorologia," which begin the series. Stephen Slemon has argued the general case for magical realism as a postcolonial mode of discourse, which he characterizes as follows:

> The site of each text is a localized region that is metonymic of the post-colonial culture as a whole. And in each text, history is foreshortened so that the forces operating in the real social relations of the culture are brought metaphorically into play. The metaphysical clash or double vision inherent in colonial history and language is recapitulated in transmuted form in the text's oppositional language or narration and mirrored in its thematic level.[50]

From the very beginning of the "Love of the Beaver" series, then, the reader is required to adopt a position that will enable a dialectical manner of reading: one that forestalls the collapse of one narrative mode into another, and that encourages a recognition that the effect of this slippage in the text is an erosion of totalitarian system. As Stephen Slemon says, the narratives of magical realism invite "a kind of reading process in which the imagination becomes stimulated into summoning into being new and liberating 'codes of recognition'."[51] Reading in this way, by the time one reaches the third poem in the series—which is based upon the clichéd metaphorical equivalence of the beaver with Canadian National identity—there is little chance of reading this as other than parody; so that the beaver becomes, as Mikhail Bakhtin might say, the "decrowning double" of the Canadian image or character.[52] From my point of view, the slippage is from a narrative of mastery, with its central imagery of dis/memberment, to a narrative of transformation, or re/memberment.

That the structure of dis/memberment involves the deconstruction of creation is made quite explicit in the second poem of the series, where the reader learns that the beaver is hunted for its precious stones—"these Cods or Follicles are found in both the sexes"—for these have magical and medicinal properties to ward off evil and keep illness at bay.[53] But this information comes in the form of three found documents, supposed historical treatises on the subject of the beaver—which encourages the reader to activate the structure of re/memberment.

That each structure contains the trace of the other is perfectly clear even at the level of content: "Hippocrates affirmeth" that a perfume made from the purloined private parts of the beaver (mixed, ironically, with "Asses dunge &

swines grease") will "openeth a closed womb";[54] and Johannes, a servant of the Apothecary to the King, testifies how the beaver has been seen literally to dismember itself in order to escape entrapment.[55] And although Sir Thomas Browne denies this, the myth of survival finds its way into "National Identity":

> i am a canadian
> apparently
> castrated/spayed
>
> but like the subtle beaver
> what i throw the hunters
> isn't half of what i've saved[56]

This I take to be a highly politicized and regional parody; for the fictional documents in which the modern myth has its origin correspond to the Renaissance and Counter Reformation documentation of the native subject in the genesis in eastern Canada. Thus, speaking of *The Jesuit Relations* and its allied documents, Healy writes:

> Whole mythologies of martyrdom, belief and nation grew from these accounts. New France was, from an early point, theological and sacred ground, and the Indians were caught in embraces that were as frequently apocalyptic as they were commercial. The wilderness of Canada became a forest of symbols in which the correspondence of missionaries worked with a religious sense of *correspondence*—albeit with fixed meanings—that the symbolist imagination of Baudelaire was to develop as a more open aesthetics in the late nineteenth century.[57]

It is here precisely that I see the achievements of Ursell and Lane as having something in common: neither the documents of the one nor the decadence of the other tells the whole story; against this, there is another story, of poetry in the *making*, which is bound up with a sense of justice and the hope of eliminating pain.

NOTES

1. Vincent Buckley, quoted in Barbara Wade and Linda M. Leitch, "To See Ourselves," *Books in Canada* (January 1982): 6.
2. For a discussion of the "block formations" of conquistadorial ego, see Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983).
3. Barbara Milech, "Mapping the Subject: An Analysis of Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*," in *Regionalism and National Identity: Multi-Disciplinary Essays on*

Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, ed. Reginald Berry and James Acheson (Christchurch, New Zealand: ACSANZ, 1985), 535.

4. Fred Wah, "Elite 3," in *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1985), 62.
5. Pamela Banting, "An Interview with Fred Wah," *Brick* 27 (Spring 1986): 13.
6. Fred Wah, "From in Here," in *Loki Is Buried at Smoky Creek: Selected Poems*, ed. George Bowering (Vancouver: Talon Books Ltd., 1980), 126.
7. The epigraph taken from Yeats's *A Vision* and placed by Eli Mandel at the front of his *Dreaming Backwards: The Selected Poetry of Eli Mandel, 1954-81*, ed. Robert Kroetsch (Don Mills: General Publishing, 1981) is particularly, though ironically, relevant here:

   > It is from the *Dreaming Back* of the dead, though not from that of persons associated with our past, that we get the imagery of ordinary sleep. Much of the dream's confusion comes from the fact that the image belongs to some unknown person.

8. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 292.

   > There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.

9. Milech, "Mapping the Subject," 535.
10. Andrew Suknaski, *Wood Mountain Poems* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976).
11. Les Murray, "The Grassfire Stanzas," in *The People's Otherworld* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1983), 4.
12. Dorothy Hewett, "This Time," in *Rapunzel in Suburbia* (Sydney, Australia: Prism, 1975), 49.
13. Andrew Suknaski, "After 'A Prairie Boy's Summer'," in *In the Name of Narid*, ed. Dennis Cooley (Erin, Ontario: Porcupine's Quill, 1981), 9.
14. Anne Campbell, "Pine Poems," in *No Memory of a Move* (Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1983), 14.
15. J.J. Healy, "Literature, Power and the Refusals of Big Bear: Reflections on the Treatment of the Indian and of Aborigine,"; in *Australian/Canadian literatures in English: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Russell McDougall and Gillian Whitlock (Melbourne: Methuen Australia, 1987), 80.
16. For the theory of reading that regards the text as reducible to a matrix of word or image which generates all of its systematizable ambiguities, see Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).
17. The term is adapted from Wilson Harris's "fortress book," which describes "absolute structuralism" as an "activity of subordinated psyche," in *Womb of Space*, xii.

18. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 32.
19. Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), 155.
20. Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984), 9.
21. Mandel, "Petroglyphs at St. Victor," in *Dreaming Backwards*, 102.
22. Kroker, *Technology*, 11.
23. Mandel, "The Silence," in *Dreaming Backwards*, 47.
24. Lorna Crozier, "Childhood," in *The Garden Going on Without Us* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 26.
25. Judith Krause, "& Wasn't It Good of the Martins to Take in the Dog," in *What We Bring Home* (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1986), 33.
26. Krause, *What We Bring Home*, 3.
27. "That whole kind of conjunction of two forces: the wildness of action which is shaped by ceremony or festival. And the doubled language that goes with it: a ritualized language and an abandoned language." Robert Kroetsch in Neuman and Wilson, *Labyrinths*, 37.
28. Krause, *What We Bring Home*, 10.
29. Most people know only this first part of the incantatory relic of the "Ladybird" verse. There is, however, more to the rhyme:

    All except one,
    And that's little Anne,
    And she has crept under
    The warming pan.

    Apparently mitigating total tragedy, these lines nevertheless play into my reading of Krause's "burning candles" (as a deconstructive citation of the ladybird's house on fire): is it not ironic to seek protection from a fire under a warming pan?
30. Neuman and Wilson, *Labyrinths*, 43.
31. Dennis Cooley, "The Vernacular Muse in Prairie Poetry, Part 1," *Prairie Fire* 7 (Winter 1986): 25-26.
32. Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983), 65.
33. Cooley, "Vernacular Muse," 34.
34. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 14.
35. Les Murray corroborates this in an interview with Paul Kavanagh and Peter Kuch, *Southerly* 4 (1984): 375.
36. See Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 68-69.
37. Laurence Ricou, introduction to *Twelve Prairie Poets* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1976), 17.
38. George Bowering, *Craft Slices* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1985), 87.
39. Wilson Harris, radio interview by Norman Talbot, "The Word this Week," 2NUR-FM (University of Newcastle, New South Wales), 13 August 1979.
40. Patrick Lane, "Buffalo Stones," in *Old Mother* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982), 9.
41. Wilson Harris, *Carnival* (London: Faber, 1985), 45-46.

42. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5.
43. Ibid., 14.
44. Ibid., 19.
45. Lane, *Old Mother*, 8.
46. Ibid., 9.
47. I take my cue for this kind of reading from Nelson Hilton's *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1983).
48. Dennis Cooley, "Some Principles of Line Breaks," in *Trace: Prairie Writers on Writing*, ed. Birk Sproxton (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1986), 146.
49. Geoffrey Ursell, "Refusing to Hunt Beaver (Gros Ventre in the year 1804)," in *Trap Lines* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1982), 21.
50. Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," *Canadian Literature 116 (Spring 1988): 20.*
51. Ibid.
52. On carnival parody, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 127.
53. Ursell, "Castrologia," in *Trap Lines*, 15.
54. Ibid., 13.
55. Ibid., 14-15.
56. Ibid., 16.
57. Healy, "Literature, Power and the Refusals of Big Bear," 72.

The Exact Shape Of Distance

PATRICK LANE

I begin this essay cognizant of the limitation imposed on this conference: the idea that there is a particular poetry here in Saskatchewan, a unique and individual voice intrinsic to this place; a verse that by definition is wholly our own, distinct and absolute, recognizable, immutable, common to its geography and its people. That there have been poems written here, and poets who have lived here is true, but it is no less true that there have been poems written elsewhere, and poets living there who have also made poems out of our human world. Anne Szumigalski in one of her poems puts it this way:

> and dryly you explain to your child how the sun is really an image of our idea of the sun as the prairie is a reflection of our need for flatness *consider* you tell him *the clever dance of the bee which is in the exact shape of her idea of distance.*[1]

The not so gentle irony of those lines are as good a frame as any for this place, but John Newlove's are equally apt:

> Being a small person bound
> in a small circle, I think
> of large things, obscurely . . .[2]

What is important is not that poetry is written here, but that it is written at all. The memory of the human is manifest in the collective images poets make from their world; "the unyielding phrase" as John Newlove says,[3] although he borrowed the line from an obscure pamphlet written by Leon Trotsky. It is as reasonable to quote Andrew Suknaski who speaks of our "responsibility/to dreams/where a single/word/breaks/the heart."[4] That there is passion here cannot be questioned, and that there have been individuals who have recorded it in distinct form is also without question. That one of these forms happens to be poetry is our good luck, but it could as easily have been music, sculpture, or dance, which are the same thing in a different form, that is to say, a celebration of the human, its will and desire to endure with something close to the dignity of joy, the particular pleasure which all living things share, whether it be a

caragana hedge hurting itself into flower, or a bee doing its carnal dance far above the earth. And perhaps that's what Anne Szumigalski means when she says: "the clever dance of the bee which is in the exact shape of her idea of distance."

That is what a poem is, an exact shape of our human idea of distance, whether it be geographical, perceptual, or simply joyful: an utterance at least, an expression of being, a dance. As Lorna Crozier says of Nijinsky, "his handwriting jumps with his heart."[5] Lorna Crozier also speaks of "imagined light/pure and crystal/emptied of everything/but itself."[6] It is that "imagined light" immanent in everything that all poets speak of; that pristine moment of clarity, concentrated, absolute, so that even a small stone on a beach holds within it all our ideas of desire, our need for the transformative moment, "emptied of everything/but itself." If our reading of human history is correct then it is that sense of immanent spirit in all things we value the most, the sure grace of the imagination when it perceives itself in wonder.

The introspective moment is not something we allow ourselves too often in public and when we do we carefully call it art or, occasionally, madness. It is part of our northern heritage to value reflection only when it is private. We distrust the public exhibition of deep feeling. As Ed Dyck says, "Contradictions within must be carefully handled."[7] He also says we must "Build the order of the pavilion of the universe."[8] It is a reasonable thing to do, the key word being *order*. The greatest of poems contains contradictions, a conflict between order and disorder, the necessary balance between them maintained by discipline. *The Goldberg Variations* as played by Glenn Gould are an example of this in performance. What makes his interpretation of Bach wonderful is the profound awe you feel listening to discipline overcoming both order and disorder, obsession carried beyond itself, inhuman with a great and terrible love. Or as Ed Dyck says in *The Mossbank Canon*, "Who let the water escape from a broken bucket?"[9] The answer, of course, is that we did, as we always have, and always will, broken buckets being eminently human. John Newlove speaks for all of us about "The single, faltering, tenuous line of melody/ displayed by a thin man's lungs/ unsurely, halting in the winter air: /what to say?"[10] It is a good question, as apt for this place as for any: or as I tried to say in a poem: "Shall we sing other than/our lives? Peace, wisdom, /excellence in the small/affairs of the heart?"[11]

The original question remains, is there a particular poetry in this place? I would say there are particular poems, but there is not a particular poetry. There

are critics who would disagree. I think Andrew Suknaski understands the nature of critics when he says:

> to the critics
> if you think only man
> decon-
> structs
> or balances
> ledgers
> consider the cyclone
> over george pana's place[12]

But this is not the place to criticize critics, it would be redundant to do so. What is remarkable is that there have been a few minor poets here in the past few decades. By minor, I mean poets who have written five or six poems each that are of such a quality they deserve to stand among the best in the human history of language, and there are other, younger poets who aspire to the same, and who may, with enough obsessive patience and discipline, achieve an equal or, perhaps, even greater distinction.

The particular voices of such poets as Anne Szumigalski, John Newlove, Elizabeth Brewster, Lorna Crozier, Andrew Suknaski, and Ed Dyck are unique and absolutely unlike each other in the forms and structures they work with. Their poems cannot be categorized other than to simply call them poems, rhythmic groupings of words in a compressed space. Some of these poets take more space than others, but all their efforts are recognizable as poems. Some of these poems can be identified as being from Saskatchewan in that they occasionally refer to a place such as *Verigin* or *Wood Mountain*, use nouns such as *cistern, magpie,* and *gopher*, or the expressions like *correction line*. But these are not enough to isolate a whole poetry. Good poems are part of the human world. Saskatchewan is not an island cut off from the world, although our critics sometimes pretend the world is an island cut off from Saskatchewan. Some of the poets here were trained in the university while others are auto-didactic, but all poets voraciously consume the known literature of the world, not just of their own place. What distinguishes a good poet from a bad one is unique voice. The most difficult thing for a poet to learn, besides patience and discipline, is to trust his or her own voice. It is a difficult thing to do, largely because it doesn't sound like anyone else's, it doesn't sound like any poetry he or she has ever heard before. It is therefore something highly suspicious not only to the poet, but also

to the critics of poetry, particularly in a country such as ours with a large inferiority complex. The establishment loves those poets most who write and sound like somewhere else, the United States, perhaps, or England, or worse, poets translated by Americans into American English. What are critics to do with this new voice, this new species in the language? The answer to that is, very little. It is much safer to wait for a hundred years and let history do it, that strange documented fiction we call our official past.

> The beginning of this poem is a beckoning
> it is myself or some other gesturing in a
> house almost dark[13]

These lines from Anne Szumigalski recognize how rare poetry is in its making, for all poems are a beckoning, a small cry in a garden, or as Lorna Crozier has it, "Something moves/just beyond the mind's/clumsy fingers."[14] The fact that we recognize what is moving is terribly important, as John Newlove, in an exemplary poem called "The Pride," explains:

> Those are all stories;
> the pride, the grand poem
> our land, of the earth itself,
> will come, welcome, and
> sought for, and found,
> in a line of running verse,
> sweating, our pride;
>
> we seize on
> what has happened before,
> one line only
> will be enough,
> a single line
> and then the sunlit brilliant image suddenly floods us
> with understanding, shocks our
> attentions, and all desire
> stops, stands alone;
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "the unyielding phrase
> in tune with the epoch,"
> the thing made up

of our desires,
not of its words, not only
of them, but of something else
as well, that which we desire
so ardently, that which
will not come when
it is summoned alone,
but grows in us
and idles about and hides
until the moment is due—

the knowledge of
our origins, and where
we are in truth,
whose land this is
and is to be.[15]

The key to the greatness of this particular poem (and it can be safely argued that "The Pride" is one of the finest late-century poems written in English) is that someone made it at all. If a place is important it is because it is lucky enough to have been there when the poet sang, and if this is true, then Saskatchewan has been very lucky for it has been here when a few truly fine poems have been written. We know Rome from the few rough lines Catullus left us, and Greece from the fragments from Sappho's agile verse. François Villon gave us a small intimate window on a lost century of France, Lorca the colour *green* which, for me, will always be *verde*, all of Babylon is in the broken epic of Gilgamesh, and then there are the many worlds in the running lines of Dickinson, Yeats, Williams, Neruda, Bachman, and Ritsoz. It is not what we have lost that is important, but that we have valued language enough to preserve the few fragments we have of the human desire to celebrate both pain and pleasure, love and death.

The great horned owl unrolls
her last long vowel to the tallow moon.
She abandons shadows, the light
and half-light of poplars around the empty house,
the broken plows and crockery,
the windmill that does not turn the wind.
No longer will she watch you search
through dust for pieces of your past.

> She has seen her shadow nailed to the barn
> and her young die in eggs that have no shells.[16]

That, of course, is a lyric poem by Lorna Crozier, called "Study in Grey." The lyric poem has suffered recently from a lack of criticism, the late twentieth century preoccupied by the shift toward "postmodernism," "magic-realism," and "deconstructionism." This move towards more prosaic forms and structures has left the lyric in a kind of limbo, relegated to a tradition that is looked upon as humanistic and therefore suspect. However, there is room for things of the heart, room for pity, compassion, anger, and love, expressed in song. The lyric is an enduring form, having survived thirty centuries of literary expression. The metonymic and the metaphoric are intrinsic to all poetry. William Butler Yeats and Emily Dickinson have survived. "There is a train forever/hurling itself at all of us."[17] Andrew Suknaski said that. I think I know what he means.

What is important is that we make room for good poems and good poets regardless of the particular form such poems take. The *new* lies in the risking of a voice to sing. That is why all poetry from our deepest past to now is always *new* when we read it. It is alive again, rhythmic, beating inside us during the moment of reflection, the moment of making when the reader becomes the poet, the past and future fused in the present, the *now*, that point in time where we all irrevocably live, where we have always lived. If time is an illusion, then the Indians were right when they said all we can know of the past is what our grandmothers and grandfathers tell us for they are the only ones alive who have seen it. The stories told by the old people are ourselves, the articulate moment, lucid, embroidered by our understanding of the dilemma of being simply human and therefore beautiful in spite of ourselves.

John Newlove, paraphrasing a few lines from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, says:

> Not to lose the feel of the mountains
> while still retaining the prairies
> is a difficult thing. What's lovely
> is whatever makes the adrenalin run;
> therefore I count terror and fear among
> the greatest beauty. The greatest
> beauty is to be alive, forgetting nothing,
> although remembrance hurts
> like a foolish act, is a foolish act.[18]

That act of foolishness is not shame, but a kind of self-effacing grief, a burning away of illusion, a remembering of things. *Things*. A strange word to represent the repository of memory, the mind being full of things. All of us contain still moments, perfect pictures of events inside our minds. They are like the faces that appear on our eyes when they are closed, strange faces of people we have never seen before. Some are benign, some angry, some in pain, and many seem content, wise and somehow happy. None of us knows who they are, they are just there. The one I see most often is a women. Her face is turned away from me so all I can see is the fall of her hair and part of her cheek. She is crying, I don't know why I know that for I cannot see her face. Perhaps it is the angle of her head, the way her shoulders curve. What is important is that she has been crying on my closed eye for forty-eight years. She has been there *now* for a long time.

> If only we could see better with our huge eyes perhaps we could read the memorial scratched on every stone.[19]

I believe Anne Szumigalski knows about eyes, just as I know she knows about baths and tiny golden carp, rhododendrons and odalisques. As she says, "those savage cries our violent/our pathetic language of poems."[20] If poets despair it is because of the inadequacy of themselves to live with the many forms of beauty, and the inadequacy of language to contain the moment of *now*. Elusive, ephemeral, the poem is a holograph of a house we can walk through without it touching us or our touching it. As Ed Dyck says:

> this is the purpose:
> to test the player of songs with an
> instrument so final
> it can not be known, it can only be
> learned.[21]

They are a young man's words and they speak of challenge and audacity, our struggle to know. There are no tricks in poetry. When the reader thinks there is a trick to making a poem then he or she is well on the road toward cynicism and spiritual death. No child watching a magician thinks of tricks. Mercurial, magisterial, the mind of the child is the mind of the man or woman the child will live inside someday like a homunculus, a half-remembered thing who once lived in a miraculous world.

Some of Saskatchewan's poets came from somewhere else, some of them

came from here and left, others decided to stay. It is a reasonable place to be in, a good place to put words together, to gather them into shapes and then show them to people, people who live here or live somewhere else. Poets shape their place just as their place shapes them. After they have lived in a country for ten years, they become it. All their cells have been replaced with the atoms of the new world, and each atom learns from the one before it, learns the ancient dances of the child, the stories of the grandfather, the songs of the grandmother. Saskatchewan is now old enough to have grandparents. It was when we were old enough to have their stories and songs that we began to make poetry. It takes that long.

Five years ago Rudy Wiebe asked me at a conference in Edmonton if there was any use for poetry. He spoke of prose, the large vision contained in a novel, its capacity to enclose a whole people in its many pages. The possibilities inherent in such a form could frame a nation's history, provide a vision large enough for a people to live with. At the time I had nothing to say. It seemed to me, at that moment, he was right. Poetry seemed to me to be a kind of indulgence, a minor note, a fragile waste of human time in the face of the great issues and events of this century, this country. I don't believe that any more, if I even believed it at the time. The affirmation comes, I believe, in a line from Anne Szumigalski: "I must have you sit here/and listen while I tell you the rest of the story."[22] And from Lorna Crozier, "There is much to learn/and much to teach/here/where all things are."[23]

So what then is the use of poetry, in this place or any other? Or should it be used at all? It is not a commodity, something to be put to use, or used up, or useless, or of any use at all. It is there, I know that, even as I know that the record of human misery and human hope is held in the delicate lines of a few poems, a few words strung together like sparrows on a clothesline, afraid to descend and feed while the wind blows around them. I think of John Newlove's sense of anguish and memory when he speaks of:

> my small mother, orange flannel nightgown,
> early light. Wee Willie Winkie, her finger
> to her lips, walks in a slow motion
> on her delicate ankles,
> sibilant, saying Shh, shh,
> Father's dead.
>
> . . . . .

You sparrow, mother, you
beautiful sparrow.[24]

Perhaps it is here where poetry begins again, in whatever small city, town or village, whether it be on these great plains of our West, or a small room in a country somewhere else, Chile or Nicaragua, Mozambique or Poland, the great plain that is everywhere where humans live. Words rise up because it is in us to sing. Surely that is enough. Surely it is what we are here to celebrate. We are not here to tear apart the fabric of poems, to break down the small order we have allowed ourselves. There are poets and there are poems. Some are here.

It is our nature to sing. Elie Wiesel speaks of this in his book, *Night*, when he and thousands of others were being marched between death camps at the end of World War II. He was lying in a shed covered with bodies of the dead and the dying, exhausted, without hope. Somewhere nearby was a friend, Juliek, a musician, alive or dead, Wiesel didn't know. He says:

I heard the sound of music. The sound of a violin in this dark shed, where the dead were heaped on the living. What madman could be playing the violin here, at the brink of his own grave? Or was it really an hallucination?

It must have been Juliek.

He played a fragment from Beethoven's concerto. I had never heard sounds so pure. In such a silence.[25]

At its best, language gives us that, a sound that holds us. And perhaps that is the answer I have to Rudy Wiebe's question. A poem is a sound that holds us.

I would like to end this paper with a poem I wrote in Chile, in Santiago, that city where Pinochet holds the people in his fist. It is called "Voices."

He is a man without a voice
who hears many voices.
Every voice makes him lonely.
Every voice makes him afraid.
There is one voice that is silent.

It is a voice only he can hear.
He wishes he could hear it
in his mouth, a sound
he could shape with his teeth

into a tongue, a tongue
whose dance he could remember.

If he could remember
it would be the voice of the wall
after the body has fallen,
the sound of roads who remember feet,
the ears who remember the fingers,
who sing to the hands,
telling them to pick up the body
from the place where it has fallen,
the place of forgetting,
the place of the many hours
which are the beginning of the days,
the sun rising,
the first sound in the mouth
which of all sounds is made of love

and is strange only because
it is made of love, the mouth
saying *Mother* and meaning
to begin all over again
from the beginning, the first
sound, the sound of a child
who is slowly becoming a man,
a man who wonders
as the many words rise,
the words
tongue,
tooth,
mouth,
child.

NOTES

1. Anne Szumigalski, "The Bees," in *Dogstones* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1986), 66.
2. John Newlove, "Remembering Christopher Smart," in *The Fat Man: Selected Poems 1962-1972* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), 85.
3. "The Pride," in *Fat Man*, 73.
4. Andrew Suknaski, "Betrayal Beginning in Dreams," in *The Land They Gave Away* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), 153-54.
5. Lorna Crozier, "Nijinsky," in *The Garden Going On Without Us* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 138.
6. Crozier, "Garden in Winter," in *Garden*, 119.
7. Ed Dyck, *The Mossbank Canon* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1982), 77.

8. Ibid., 23.
9. Ibid., 83.
10. Newlove, "East from the Mountains," in *Fat Man*, 28.
11. Patrick Lane, "I am Tired of Your Politics," in *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 106.
12. Suknaski, "Second Thoughts," in *Land*, 138.
13. Anne Szumigalski, "Beckoning," in *Doctrine of Signatures* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1983), 27.
14. Crozier, "In Moonlight," in *Garden*, 123.
15. Newlove, "The Pride," in *Fat Man*, 72-73.
16. Crozier, "Study in Grey," in *Garden*, 59.
17. Suknaski, "The Crossing," in *Land*, 145.
18. Newlove, "The Double-Headed Snake," in *Fat Man*, 48.
19. Szumigalski, "The Great Camus," in *Doctrine*, 4.
20. Szumigalski, "Our Sullen Art," in *Doctrine*, 40.
21. Ed Dyck, "The Recent History of the Guitar in Turnhill," in *Odpoems* (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1978), 72.
22. Szumigalski, "Honny," in *Doctrine*, 59.
23. Crozier, "Indigo," in *Garden*, 136-37.
24. John Newlove, "The Permanent Tourist Comes Home," in *The Night the Dog Smiled* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1986), 14-15.
25. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 90.

The Trestle of Saskatchewan Fiction: A European Look at Edna Alford's "The Lineman"

SIMONE VAUTHIER

Bringing my own culture and structures, not to mention experience, to Canadian fiction, I engage in a process of uninventing/inventing which dialogically responds, at least so I hope, to the process of naming/unnaming, inventing/uninventing that energizes the literature. The text I have chosen to misread is a mirror-story, Edna Alford's "The Lineman," because of the ways in which it inscribes Saskatchewan and space.

First, a word or two about the textual space in which it is itself inscribed. "The Lineman" is the last story in *The Garden of Eloise Loon.* Such placement enhances the meaning(s) of the separate text—first broadcast on CBC's *Ambience*—which becomes here a semiotic echo chamber. It cannot be an accident, for instance, that the narrator-protagonist should be named Jack Lune in a collection entitled *The Garden of Eloise Loon* and one in which references to the moon are fairly frequent. Lune, moon, loon, the moon and madness, the loon and madness, the loon and the moon: the semiotic patterns deserve to be explored.

The placement of "The Lineman" also turns it into a border of the overall text. The bordering is all the more marked because *The Garden of Eloise Loon* is a sequence of linked stories, in which various elements—settings, characters, signifiers—unobtrusively recur. Yet the effect of closure is not as strong as it would be if the collection were a true cycle.[1] At the same time, the last story when seen in relation to the first, fittingly entitled "Head," forms a frame to the in-between stories. Both oppose the prairie space—the place of origins for the two I-narrators—to a heterotopic space which is British Columbia, and more particularly the city of Vancouver. But the first nameless narrator's relation to his native prairie has been perturbed because he left to work in British Columbia. When he comes home, unemployed, he finds that his head, which he had left on a rock, in order, so to speak, for it to do his seeing for him "looking out

at the sky and the fields any time [he] felt like it,"[2] has been picked "clean as a whistle" by birds. Somebody has put a couple of little stones into the sockets and hung a pair of glassless spectacles on the skull. This is a short text which works its symbolism by means of surrealistic effects. In "The Lineman" the narrator's situation is reversed: Jack Lune has not left the prairie and, though retired, refuses to take his brother's advice and to move to Vancouver—and a home. But although he has his head screwed on, there is some doubt, as we shall see, that he has kept his wits about him. Both stories deal with breaking or not breaking away from the prairie space. Both stories themselves break away, though in different ways, from the realistic conventions which have long prevailed in prairie fiction, and they programme a metaphoric reading. More strikingly, they represent a rupture of the collection's own prevailing mode. For most of the other stories tend to emphasize the referential dimension, even as they narrate the experiences of impaired or unbalanced minds, even when they introduce a grotesque or eerie note.[3]

Because they are not mimetic in the same way as most of the other stories, the first and last texts are threatened and threatening borders: because the world they create is less stable, they cannot quite contain the more solid world of Norwegian families or the shadowy but oh so realistic world of the sanitarium in "The Children's Bin." Moreover, the whimsicality of the liminal stories in a sense undercuts the referentiality of the stories which they frame. From the threshold of the collection, we are warned, this is an imaginary garden with imaginary toads (or rather worms, as in "The Garden of Eloise Loon"). "Head" (notice the absence of any determinant in the title which reminds me of one of the less wild Dalis) functions in relation to the whole a little like the legend to Magritte's famous painting, "This is not a pipe." In the stories that follow we may believe that we are looking through a window at the world of a Saskatchewan community, or homestead, or funeral parlour, but the first story also warns us: this is not a homestead, not a children's hospital. "The Lineman" is a reminder of the doubleness of fiction—and a test of our ability to detect and accept the doubleness.

It would be easy to read the story literally, mimetically. What if the retired lineman got "called back" and did start back to work "when they abandoned the line and took up the tracks and the ties"? Nothing simpler to explain, really, since the garrulous narrator himself tells us that other people think that he is a "nut." A mad lineman is entitled to his little delusions, isn't he? Furthermore,

inasmuch as mentally or emotionally disturbed characters abound in *The Garden of Eloise Loon*, the story of Jack fits nicely in the sequence.

Such a *naturalization* of the narrative as the projection of a mad mind, one could argue, does not detract from the meaning of the story, particularly from its implicit criticism of modern society. Literature, after all, has accustomed us to hear the truth about our crazy world from the mouths of people considered insane. Nevertheless, this is a reductive reading, which does not take into account the tonalities of the discourse. This is how the story begins:

> Three minutes to twelve by my time. Pocket watch. Damn thing won't stop. Just like the clock these scientists are supposed to have somewhere in Europe. This clock is supposed to tell how close we are to blowing ourselves to smithereens or something . . . They figure it's all set to go at high noon, too, only it's about five to twelve on their clock whereas it's already three to twelve on mine (218).

The opening sounds more allegorical than referential and it strikes a dissonant note, at once perturbing and amusing. Nor does a referential reading do justice to the indeterminacy of the story and to its layered significance.

"The Lineman" is not what it purports to be at the primary level—the ramblings of a shrewd (or crazy) old man; it is a trope carefully constructed by a woman writer, even if I am sure she never thought in terms of the critical categories I am using.

As a trope, it obliges us to keep together in our minds several levels of signification, and contradictory conclusions, such as that Jack is mad and not mad. In short, it puts us in the position of the lineman himself:

> And just because they took up the tracks don't mean there's no train. In fact I believe it's right on time, according to my watch. Which is why I came. And why I've been here all along (228).

End of the storyline. But if we follow the line of the language, what do we find? The reader as lineman/linewoman. Just because we have only black lines on the page does not mean we have no train of thoughts and images as we read on. More, we do believe in the described train, "slipping along the track, clickety-clack, clickety-clack" (218). There is no train and there is a train. This is why we came. To stand "by the tracks where [we] can see things coming" (218). But this is also what the writer does. Just before the lines I have quoted, the story has Jack say, " I never wanted to be an engineer, didn't appeal to me at all. He can't see himself coming the way I can. Too close, if you see what I

mean'' (218). It is as if in the projection of engineer and lineman the text were splitting the actor and the spectator, the author as scriptor and the author as reader. The story is the tracks—which are double—and the trains, is the dancer and the dance.

In other words, the narrative trope can be read metafictionally, as encoding the activity of writing/reading. But even then, it points to the paradox of an activity which recreates presence out of absence, achieves distance out of closeness, or vice versa.

Yet I do not intend to suggest that the story should simply be read as a metafictional piece, however important that dimension is in my view, and however sorry I am not to have time to explore it more fully. While the self-reflexive narrative conveys something of the relation of fiction, which is present at least during the writing/reading act, to reality, which is absent, it is still committed somehow to a vision of the empirical ''real''; it still obliquely deals with the ''world out there,'' both the specific world of Saskatchewan and the world as the environment and the laws of human life.

Because the narrative is a trope, any decoding is bound to go beyond and exceed the images of the text, and yet fall short of them.

One could concentrate on the network of its major images. For example, one might make much of the ''train'' by deploying the metaphorical potentialities it acquires throughout the text and which associate it with the ''high noon'' of the nuclear apocalypse, thereby enlarging the image of the journey to cosmic dimensions. Or one might play with ''tracks'' and ''patterns'' and the way in which they trace a double world, visible and invisible. Rather than study the metaphorical clusters of the text, however, I will approach the story from another angle and will return to its inscription of space and time.

In an essay, Rudy Wiebe has stressed the difficulty for the writer to encompass the landscape of the West: ''To touch this land with words requires an architectural structure; to break into the space of the reader's mind with the space of this western landscape and the people in it, you must build a structure of fiction like an engineer builds a bridge or skyscraper over and into space. A poem, a lyric will not do. You must lay great black steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design and, like the fiction of the Russian steppes, build a giant artifact. No song can do that.''[4] Edna Alford takes up the challenge of the vastness of Saskatchewan in a contrary way: she attempts to deal with Saskatchewan space in six and a half pages; she does not lay great black steel lines of fiction, does not erect the giant artifact which Rudy Wiebe calls for. Rather,

she works the steel lines themselves and the "pattern" they impose on Canadian space into her fiction by making her narrator a lineman. Then the character himself becomes a metonym of the effort to control the immensity of the West through the railway. As a CNR man, he has got "a pattern in [his] head that covers the whole country" (219). He boasts, "if you took a picture of my head, you could see all the stations, all the crossings, switches, trestles, practically every bloody tie in the province of Saskatchewan at the very least" (219). Space has become diagram, map. Moreover, what is usually thought of as outside, the container, is now inside the contained man. Space is headspace.

In keeping with the pattern in his head which looks "a little like a game of snakes and ladders," the narrator, though concerned with "the real land and not the paper kind you buy and sell blind without ever setting eyes on it" (221), never describes his own setting. For all his refusal to leave Livelong, "somebody's got to live here for Christ's sake"(222), he gives no idea to his audience of what it looks like. Even the elevators are introduced only because they are no longer there (writing and absence again): one has been taken down, the other "burned down in the fall"(220). Such predicates are hardly descriptive.

If Saskatchewan is a map, it is also synecdochically encapsulated in a little verse:

> If your HEARTSWELL
> You'll LIVELONG
> In a FAIRHOLME
> In GLASLYN (221)

There is no time to dwell on the functioning of these lines. But allow me a brief parenthesis. The quotation opens the narrator's soliloquy to another, a collective, voice, which itself builds upon the naming discourse of former generations. In the verse, the toponyms function as puns, paranomasias, at once designating the four towns mentioned and meaning something so that together they form a utopic paradigm, which contrasts with the omens of temporal destruction in the narrator's speech. The verse becomes almost a prescription for right livin*g*. Jack himself perceives the pattern in the naming: "Sounds so peaceful, so hopeful. You'd have thought they all held tickets to heaven the way they named the towns" (221) and thus implicitly directs his audience's attention to the change which time has brought, to the failure of the Canadian pastoral utopia. In this way "The Lineman" includes two time-marked discourses, and

opposes the dream of the past with the nightmare of the present, while initiating a dialogue between the literary form, Edna Alford's story, and a folk form. I do not know whether this particular verse is sung in Saskatchewan or not. If Edna Alford made it up, it adds one more level to a deceptively simple story. Such forms do exist in many countries. In any case, while here topography is almost reduced to toponymy, toponymy becomes tropography.

To return to my main argument, the paradox is that in the verse, space has been synecdochically miniaturized. But in the narrator's monologue, the little inventory serves as a spatial (and temporal) extension that significantly points to the referential area of which Trestle is a fictional part. (Jack Lune lives in Livelong, but Trestle, Edna Alford's Yoknapatawpha or rather Jefferson, is mentioned in "The Lineman."[5])

On the whole, the narrator's attitude to space tends to be abstract. Because he looks at the tracks, "the patterns on the land," and thinks of flyways, "the patterns on the sky" and even of "the patterns on the sea," in the end all places are very much the same: "Probably a guy working those underground trains in New York City could say the same, just a different place, just a different name" (219). So names are important to him. A place *is* a name. But what's in a name? To Jack's brother, names are not enough:

> "Waiting for the train," he spit. "Even when it comes you don't know where it's been."
> "I do," I says.
> "You only know the names, Jack—and afterward you don't know where it's gone," he says.
> "I do."
> "You only know the names. You never been. It's nothing but a bloody backwater."
> "It's on the map," I says (223).

More than Jack's attitude is involved here. With such remarks, the story, distancing itself from the narrator's discourse, builds a dialogic discourse on space, the perception and experience of space, which one would like to pursue. Do places come into being when you "been" to them? I, for one, only know the names of Livelong, Fairholme or Turtleford. I never been. By initiating such a discussion, the story comments indirectly on its own use of space and intimates that the refusal of description is motivated by more than the narrator-protagonist's trade or his mental make-up.

The writer's departure here from her practice in other stories becomes high-

ly significant. Look, for instance, at the evocation of place in "The Metal Detector" or "In Case of Rapture" whose narrator, like Jack, is an elderly native of Trestle. Here, the reliance on toponyms, rather than on descriptive predicates as a means to articulate Saskatchewan space, suggests that the time has come when little more is needed, although, of course, we have the allusion to the elevators and the reference to Indians and "seismic crews."[6] By now, not only can the reader of *The Garden of Eloise Loon* supply the elements of the author's décor for her last story but so can the reader of prairie fiction as well. (Place) naming in the short story as distinguished from Jack's narration is an unnaming in a double sense—an unveiling of what lies in toponyms and a defamiliarizing of the narrative patterns that constitute "naming" in a less restricted sense.

The historical choice of toponyms for the prairie settlements and the ambiguous ideological roots of such naming are questioned while the relevance of the names to these our times is ironically denied. In Livelong, the narrator feels very much that the end of the world is at hand. "Maybe all [the settlers of Heartswell or Fairholme] ever really wanted in the first place was some holy peace and quiet"(222), but for today's inhabitants there is no longer any such thing: "No place left that's not screwed up somehow as far as I can see" (220). Thus the second aspect of unnaming: rather than attempt through naming to humanize the Saskatchewan or western landscape, as much of prairie fiction has done, the story reveals the extent to which patterns have been imposed upon the earth and the cosmos. "The other day they up and gone to Saturn. They got almost all the patterns now. I don't say all, but most," says the narrator (220). Under the circumstances, the weather reporting in which so many writers concerned with the harshness of the prairies have engaged—often with great gusto—becomes somewhat irrelevant. What the narrator is keenly aware of is Time, the fact that "We've just about finished the job" (218) and it is close to "high noon." Unnaming Saskatchewan is to lay bare mankind's plight in the nuclear age.

The process of unnaming is made possible, because of the narrator's (and the author's and the reader's) own place(s) in time. One can only unname what has been already named or misnamed. There is an historical dimension to the process that is reflected in the story through the consciousness of the narrator: he knows he "wouldn't have been any damn good as a pioneer" because he needs tracks and "these explorers and pioneers had nothing whatsoever to tell them where they'd been" (219-20). He is alert to the struggle of having to con-

front and overcome the emptiness of the prairie. "And these poor buggers, even when they got to where they stopped, it didn't mean nothing but a number. They still didn't know where they were"(220). But he emphatically does.

In fact, the narrator is very much aware of his own space-time, aware of belonging to an era that has passed: "This was my time, on the tracks. I belong on the Livelong Line. One side of the fence or the other would have been just as bad for me, pioneers or flying farmers"(219). Note the metaphor which spatializes time, "one side of the fence." In this space-time he is at home: "this is as good a place as any to do what I'm doing"(224), he concludes. Although he never describes his environment, he repeatedly gives an idea of the changes that have affected his region. Oil people are all over the place now and if they "don't seem to give a damn what happens to the place" he is willing to grant that in the past "there were some said the [railway people ran] roughshod too"(221). Now "they are taking up the tracks. All up and down this country—not just mine, not only the Livelong line . . . Even took down the trestles, took up the ties, everything, if you can believe. For what? Little piles of charred old ties marking mile after mile"(220). The instant making of archaeological traces. Man is eliminating his marks on the land thereby making new non-functional marks. Thus we are given neat capsules of Saskatchewan history that open out the short story.

What with the narrator's insistence that we are "close to the end of the line,"[7] and his comments on the patterns, "too many of them for [his] liking," that have been imposed on the earth, "The Lineman," when all is said, hardly presents Saskatchewan as a place of new beginnings and infinite possibilities. One might object that, after all, the character goes out of retirement, because he has been called back in circumstances that remain mysterious, that is to say, open to metaphoric interpretations. (If "called back," of course, is reminiscent of "called up," thereby hinting at war, "call my name" rather suggests something more supernatural. There is something of Dickens's Signalman about Jack.)[8] But Jack starts "back on the line" in what is a repetition, not a real renewal. "Only it's not so easy this time round, not so cut and dried"(221). Conversely, Saskatchewan, as depicted here, cannot be characterized as a waste land, or a hostile environment, no matter how derogatory Owen, who has moved to the coast, is on the subject of Livelong: "How can you stand it stuck up in the bush where you can't even see what's going on?" (222) he asks. Saskatchewan is pretty much like any place, the story suggests in different ways.

This in particular, is the burden of a rhyme which, says the narrator, "the little girls here in Livelong use in the spring when they're skipping rope—

> Over the trestles, over the ties
> Everyone's living, everyone dies
> Somebody's telling everybody lies
> Whoo-ooo-ooo?
> Clickety-clack
> Clickety-clack
> Clickety-clack" (223).

The basic facts of life and of fiction prevail there as everywhere. So, even if "live" and "lie" are partial anagrams of Livelong, there is nevertheless no escaping the intruder, Death, and his truth. Livelong, which inscribes man's dream and man's fate, is a synecdoche for the world. No safety there. Indeed, another story, "The Bid," reminds us that Saskatchewan "would essentially be devastated by radiation from missile attacks on bases in North Dakota and Montana" (206), and gives the (fictional) lie to the "astonishing number of people who had thought they were safe up here"(207). What is suggested in "The Lineman" is that given the threatening atomic destruction of the planet, the point in time when we find ourselves is more important than *where* we stand. "We're all in it together in the end"(222). Such predominance of time over place is an unfamiliar perspective in prairie fiction in which it is often the environment which shapes the individual.

But so is, too, the basic *donnée* of "The Lineman" and the relation of its protagonist to place. According to David Arnason, the traditional pattern of prairie fiction which readers have come to expect goes like this: "the young man growing in a bitter windswept prairie town will earn his manhood by facing a railway train on a trestle."[9] "The Lineman" parodies the pattern by keeping train and trestle but making the protagonist an old man whose life occupation has been to stand contentedly by the tracks (without making him, either, that other stereotype, the tight-lipped, inarticulate prairie character). While such a reversal may be perceived only by the reader who is a little familiar with the assumptions of prairie fiction, another feature of the character's self-positioning in space is more immediately striking because it goes counter to linguistic conventions. Jack speaks of "all the tracks ever laid. Up south, down north"(219). Or "if they can do it up south why can't we do it down north"(222). The world for him is upended or rather his description of space coordinates breaks away from the conventional naming norms. Thus does Edna Alford play with the potentialities of speaking/writing about space. Space is language; language is space.

Moreover, the scheme of inversion that can be read in the treatment of time and space is part of a larger pattern of reversal. In "The Lineman" we have not the drama, but the comedy, however muted, of Apocalypse. The theme of nuclear danger recurs in several stories of the collection. "In Case of Rapture," for instance, tells the story of a gifted doctor, Ian Addison, who speaks out against the nuclear war and becomes so obsessed with "the bomb" and his own helplessness as a physician to do anything for the survivors of a holocaust that he blows himself up with sticks of dynamite. His profession introduces the subordinate theme of the scientists' responsibility in the bomb; an allusion to Dr. Howard Johns, who developed the cobalt bomb for the treatment of cancer at University Hospital in Saskatoon, establishes some sort of identification between Johns and Ian Addison. In this as in the other stories, the apocalyptic vision is treated straight. Not so in "The Lineman," which also contrasts with an extratextual antinuclear discourse occasionally referred to in the stories.

That the mode of "The Lineman" is lighter is obvious from the first paragraph and its positing that we are in a countdown phase through its use of clocks. "Three minutes to twelve by my time. Pocket watch. Damn thing won't stop." Usually we grumble at our watches for the opposite reason that they won't work. Then there is a time discrepancy between the clocks, though one is a scientist's clock and the other is Swiss; the narrator trusts his own watch, his own sense of where we are at, rather than the scientists' evaluation of the situation. "They figure it's all set to go at high noon, only it's about five to twelve on their clock whereas it's already three to twelve on mine"(218).

The very choice of an uneducated narrator talking about the end of the world is an element in the creation of a playful tone. An element as well, needless to say, in the development of Edna Alford's protest: antinuclear discourse is not the preserve of scientists or radicals and can be articulated in ways that are at once non-intellectual and non-emotional.

Through Jack's speech, the unspeakable event is referred to in jargon-free, colloquial language. "You don't even need a ticket to get to Smithereens" (221). The railway metaphor, the transformation of the end-of-time-and-the-world into a new terminal, Smithereens, all this defamiliarizes the obscenity of the nuclear holocaust by making it homely. The following statement works in a similar way: "So what's a better way of getting us all back together again than blowing us to bits, eh, right to Kingdom come and back again. Misdeal. No deal. Reshuffle the cards for Christ's sake. The way things stand now, it doesn't look as if there's much of a choice anyway, no matter how you cut it. We've just

about finished the job"(218). The passage also reintroduces the ultimate nuclear catastrophe within the framework of Christian apocalyptic thinking since the Apocalypse is destruction of the world followed by renewal. Even if the idea that "blowing us to bits" can get us back together is not supported by a context in which faith plays little part, the black humour is still operative—and current discourse on the atom, whether pro or contra, is reversed. Cosmic cataclysm is reduced to a card game—a reduction that goes counter to antinuclear polemics—but the card game is a word game played against (that is to say because of) an awareness of chaos and death—which pronuclear argument obfuscates. There is not much choice—except a choice of words to deal and redeal with the unspeakable.

So the narrator allows himself a certain freedom with words (and with the grammar and syntax of standard English). His "pocket-watch" is also "the *clock* they gave me when I left the CNR"(218). Speaking of the heroic pioneer past, the difficulties of which he is certainly alive to, he is nevertheless able to pun: "You have to admit they (the pioneers) must have been *bushed* by the time they got this far"(221-22). Describing an engine, he says hyperbolically that it is "the loveliest sight you ever saw in all your life" and continues "just like a bullet, a sure shot, slipping along the track, clickety-clack, clickety-clack. There's nothing just like a bulling engine as far as I am concerned, steam, diesel, it doesn't matter which to me . . . As long as it is on track, it's got my vote" (218). The pun, the onomatopoeia, the images convey the narrator's delight in engines, his willingness to mix metaphors and expand language beyond the tracks. His clipped and yet chatty soliloquy is a fresh and funny way of looking at the world and of creating himself in relation to an absent, anonymous but often invoked you-listener.

Part of the comedy, however, lies in the gap between the autonomous self-creating narrator and our sense that the male character is a speaking device. First his voice is traversed by many others—echoing what "they" say, think, or report and chanting the songs of children. (His intertext is that of popular and not high culture.) But his utterance is also a "hybrid construction," combining two "languages"—his and the author's.[10] Remember the description of the engine which I just quoted. The simile of the bullet, supported by the metaphor "a sure shot," inserts the "bulling" engine into a world of technological progress that also includes weapons and the possibility of destruction, setting up an association which the speaker does not intend and which sends the reader back to the hidden writer. The final metaphor, "it's got my vote," links technology to

the political process, semantically involving the character, at least to some extent, in what is wrong with the world, although he thinks that "the little guy," "the man in the sticks like you and me," cannot do anything about the situation. Throughout, the perspective achieved adds to the comedy. At the same time, the dialogism of the text in turn implies the reader upon whom it is incumbent to perceive the double (or multiple) voice in the single fictive utterance and to realize that she or he is responsible for the construction of the text and the world. We should be laughing, or at least smiling, not at but with the lineman, ambivalently laughing at ourselves, the little guys, and at the human condition, even as we are made to think of annihilation.

You will have perceived where my tracks lead to, or rather from what station on the critical map they proceed. Of course, back to Bakhtin. I tentatively submit that there are in "The Lineman" traces of that form of the novel which, according to Bakhtin, is heir to the carnival and in some of its variants to the Menippean satire, and which he called the carnivalesque.[11] Tentatively because the inversions, literary or social, to be observed in Edna Alford's short story are neither as joyful nor as dramatic as one might expect in the carnivalisque. Absent too is the collective dimension which is so important an element of carnivalized literature. Nor does Edna Alford emphasize here the erasing of the boundary between spectacle and audience, which is a feature of the carnival, although she does so in another story of the same collection.[12] It should nevertheless be noted that by choosing a first-person narration, she makes the telling of Jack's story a performance in which he is agent and actor. And if one reads the story as metafiction, then the author is split into actor and spectator.

One might perhaps distinguish "hard" and "soft" versions of it. Hard carnivalesque: Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*, Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. Soft: some of the stories of David Arnason and this one of Alford's. The distinction perhaps blurs too much the specificity of carnivalization, however, detracting from the concept's usefulness. At any rate, to recapitulate, we here have the stylization of an oral, popular language complete with swear-words and pulsing with rhythms that, to my ear, sound Canadian (even if it must be granted that the use of folk-speech is no longer as transgressive as it used to be), the fool, the wise lunatic who knows better than the scientists, the upended world, the ambivalent playfulness: in short, the pattern of reversals I have attempted to point out.

But just as important is the transgression of the laws of commonsense: "Imagine. My own brother . . .comes all the way up here to tell *me* they abandoned

the line (as if I don't already know) and I should start packing and fly back with him. And I have to tell the son-of-a-gun the whole thing all over again,'Like I told you before, Owen, I got called back''' (223). Or take the ending which I have already quoted: ''Just because they took up the tracks don't mean there's no train.'' The character's logic, in my interpretation, is also that of the story. It is such a logic that Julia Kristeva calls ''une logique poétique,'' a poetic logic which she sees exemplified in the carnival and its ''dream logic.''[13] As I read it, ''The Lineman'' is non-disjunctive: the line closes but the train still runs. In the space-time of the narrated world, Jack Lune is considered irrational by the other characters. In the space of the narrating story, he has a logic that is simply not Aristotelian and does not work in terms of cause and effect. Moreover, alongside the visible world there is an invisible one, and between the two, both a gap and a relation of analogy: ''Just because you can't see the pattern don't mean there isn't one. Even Air Canada can tell you that'' (224). ''The Lineman'' creates an alternative double world in which we are enabled to escape the tracks of either/or logic.

According to Bakhtin, the medieval carnival was a sort of triumphant temporary liberation from the dominant truth and the established order, the creation of a second, inverted and joyous world which contrasted with the hierarchy and order of the everyday world. The carnivalesque perception was therefore linked to medieval man's feelings of insecurity in the face of the feudal order and the Church's theology, but also in the face of remembered and feared cosmic upheavals.[14] Although things on the surface have changed a great deal, it does not seem unreasonable to see in the carnivalized literature of our times a response to similar fears. Take *Gravity's Rainbow*. Even the subdued carnivalization of Edna Alford's story may well appear to have its source in the authority of official discourse on nuclear power—and perhaps of dominant discourse on Saskatchewan—not to mention the fear of nuclear destruction. After dealing seriously with the threat of the end of the world in previous stories, Edna Alford closes her collection with a serio-comic treatment in which the main character is reconciled to the unacceptable, affording the concerned reader a temporary release.

In this view of the short story, the often opposed stances of self-reflexive fiction and of referential fiction are seen as conjoined and mutually reinforcing: here metafiction serves the ends of carnivalization and the story functions, as Julia Kristeva says carnival discourse does, as a way of breaking or breaking through ''the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics'' and

thereby becoming "a social and political protest."[15] On the other hand, the Saskatchewan background against and within which the narrative unfolds gives the self-reflexive games a sort of legitimizing authority. Thus can even a short short story be a trestle between worlds—and continents.

NOTE

1. I prefer to reserve the term "cycle" for collections that have a more obvious unifying principle, such as Laurence's *A Bird in the House*, or Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, or Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Looser collections might perhaps be called sequences.
2. Edna Alford, *The Garden of Eloise Loon* (Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1986), 10. All further references to this collection are included in the text.
3. A single exception is the last story but one, "The Bid." This story of anticipating a nuclear strike progresses very slowly, and fascinatingly, towards the surreal. It then further destroys the illusion of reality by launching into self-reflexive commentaries in which the I-narrator denounces the character as fictional and the author as too prone to apocalyptic visions, "The cliche of our time" (216), while casting doubt about her own status.
4. Rudy Wiebe, "Canada in the Making," in *Encounters and Explorations, Canadian Writers and European Critics*, ed. Franz K. Stanzel and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1986). Wiebe has expressed similar ideas in earlier essays (for example, in his introduction to *Story Makers* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970). That he should come back to them is all the more interesting in view of his own practice, for some of his short stories ("The Naming of Albert Johnson," for example) masterfully convey a sense of the vastness of Canadian space.
5. The narrator once says "here in Livelong" (223) and his brother takes him to task: "all your life looking up the line, looking like you could see all the way to Trestle" (222). But Jack also speaks of Mrs. Harrow, who is the postmistress of Trestle in "In Case of Rapture." Should we conclude that the post office for Livelong (which can be located on a map of Saskatchewan) is in Trestle (which cannot)? In other words, is this part of the game, of the blurring of boundaries, or is it a slip by the author?
6. Alford uses toponyms for a different effect in "The Bid" when they become "a rosary of towns," an "unlikely litany" (205).
7. The phrase as such does not appear in "The Lineman" but in "In Case of Rapture." It may have seemed too obvious for the former. In any case, Jack uses a number of railway images to refer to Apocalypse. "You don't even need a ticket to get to Smithereens" (221).
8. See Dickens's supernatural story, "The Signalman."
9. David Arnason, "Story Forming," in *Trace: Prairie Writers on Writing*, ed. Birk Sproxton (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1986), 108.
10. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Du discours romanesque," *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, trans. Daria Olivier (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 144-45, 175, 177.
11. Mikhail Bakhtin, *l'Oeuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Age et sous la Renaissance*, trans. Andrée Robel (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), and *La Poétique de*

Dostoïevski, trans. Isabelle Kolitchett (Paris: Seuil, 1970). For an elaboration of Bakhtin's ideas, see Julia Kristeva, *Séméiotikê: recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), particularly "Le Texte Clos" and "Le mot, le dialogue et le roman."

12. In "The Bid," which is not carnivalesque but is apocalyptic, the narrative frame-break which I describe in note 3 is an equivalent of the obliteration of the spectator-actor distance.
13. Kristeva, *Séméiotikê*, 151.
14. See for instance Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 18-20, 333-34.
15. "Le carnaval est aussi ce pont qui joint les deux instances ainsi redoublées, et dans laquelle chacun des termes se reconnait: l'auteur (acteur + spectateur). C'est cette troisième instance que l'inférence romanesque adopte et réalise dans l'énoncé de l'auteur . . . l'Énonciation romanesque se révele être une inférence non-syllogistique, un compromis du témoignage et de la citation, de la voix et du livre (Kristeva, *Séméiotikê, 126).*

Beware the Four Dragons

RUDY WIEBE

My first story was published thirty-one years ago and 1987 is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of my first novel, so I think I can speak to Saskatchewan writers as an elder of the tribe. I will do so by making some comments on *More Saskatchewan Gold*,[1] an anthology of short stories. I will use it, in a representative way, to make some observations about Saskatchewan writing.

In the first place, it is an excellent idea that this book was made a mass market paperback to be distributed at a good price so that everyone can afford it. Nobody can now complain that only American writing is available in inexpensive mass market format. This book of Saskatchewan writing costs one-fifth the price of a ticket to a Saskatchewan Roughriders game and it is such a good idea that Alberta has copied it, as we copy all good things Saskatchewan; Edmonton's NeWest Press has now published a similar book called *Alberta Bound*.[2]

The title is intriguing: *More Saskatchewan Gold*. The "more" implies that there was an earlier volume and there was, in 1982.[3] This volume appeared in 1984. Good; but the word "gold" intrigues me even more.

Gold is one of the first metals known to man, and it is still the most eagerly sought. It is so ductile that an ounce of it can be drawn into an invisible wire fifty miles long; it is so malleable that 350,000 sheets of it are less than an inch thick, sheets you can look through while you are looking at them. Since before recorded history this most noble of metals has been crafted into cups, bracelets, coins, ceremonial bowls, woven into cloth, hammered into teeth, fashioned to decorate gods and knives and altars and coffins, shaped into crowns for the mightiest rulers. The practical purposes and uses of gold, which are very few and largely decorative, could never make it the most significant metal known to man. Throughout history, in cultures as widely separated by time and geography as Sumer and China, the Roman and Incan empires, gold has been man's indicator of the greatest possible wealth and power. The total gold mined in the past five hundred years would form a cube fifty-five feet on each side, some 1.2 million tons of it, and most of that is still with us. Over half is buried by govern-

ments in bank vaults throughout the world. They dig it up to bury it again, an enormous hoard guarded ceaselessly not for what can be made of it but for what it represents. The significance of gold is that you have it.

Now gold, so greatly desired, has of necessity always been secret and guarded. The ancient peoples knew this; they teach us that all gold was guarded, watched over by dragons. The *Beowulf* poet explains a self-evident truth: "A dragon *must* seek out the heathen gold hoard in the earth and guard it, gloating and rubbing his scaly loops around it. Though it never brings the dragon any true warmth and happiness." This is understandable, dragons being that nightmare amalgam of eagle and lion and crocodile and snake fused together by the fire. One does not expect primordial evil ever to find, much less guard, happiness. If you are, however, a hero or heroine, it is of course as much in your nature to confront dragons as it is in theirs to protect gold. This is where the connection is made between *More Saskatchewan Gold* and Saskatchewan writers.

"It is in the nature of dragons," the *Beowulf* poet says, "to guard gold." When I think of the thirty-one stories in this book, as I read them here and there in the world, and then read some of them again, I find they are all good, some are very good, a few are excellent, but none, I would say, is brilliant. All editors must work, of course, with what they get, and two years of Saskatchewan writing may not bring forth any brilliant stories. As William Faulkner once noted, next to poetry the short story is perhaps the most difficult literary form to master. It seems to me that competent poetry, like competent short fiction, is relatively easy to write; thousands of us do it and almost anyone can, with sufficient effort, manage one competent story. But a brilliant short story is extremely hard, perhaps impossible, for most of us ever to achieve even though we write for a lifetime. Consider two recent winners of the Governor General's Awards for fiction, Margaret Atwood for *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Alice Munro for *The Progress of Love*. I believe that Atwood for the first time has written a brilliant novel, a tale brilliant both in its ideas and its execution, and I would say that Alice Munro, having written stories for a lifetime, has two brilliant stories in her collection, "Fits" and "Miles City, Montana." These two superb writers have devoted their lives to write a few brilliant stories. Gold.

To seek gold is very difficult, and when you do find it, it is invariably guarded by dragons. In *More Saskatchewan Gold* there are numerous gold nuggets sparkling here and there, but I do not think that the gold in these stories, as a whole, has been wrested away from the dragons that guard it. I want to talk about the dragons that I see guarding this fiction gold, dragons which have not been total-

ly overcome here and very rarely are. I see four dragons, two of technique and two of understanding.

The first dragon is the dragon of convention. Many of the stories in this book have been written before in more or less exactly the same way—the patterns are all the same and the results are pretty much the same as well, so that by the time you have read two or three pages you almost know what is going to happen and then, disappointingly, it does. This is so in the construction of the stories, it is so in the way language is used and in the way a character responds and, it is there in the way conclusions are carefully wrapped up. There are a few particularities that are brilliantly different and many of these reflect the particularities of where these stories take place in Saskatchewan. Either that or the way a voice speaks, sometimes, saying something you recognize: I have not heard that before. But always one of the dragons that dominates us when we look at stories is the fact that by convention we know how stories are supposed to be written and we then write them that way. But there is never only one way. That dragon has to be slain in order for the gold to be liberated.

The second dragon I note here is the dragon of chronology, of time sequence. All of us know ourselves only in the past; we sit on this knife-edge of the present and we perhaps joyfully or fearfully anticipate the future, but we only know the facts of the past and so we are in a sense dominated by time. The result is that often we write stories exactly in the way that we think we have experienced our own personal time because there is a kind of causality of sequence required of us in story as it is (we think backwards) in time. In a way I am talking of course about the standard conception of plot, which is: this happened and then this happened because that had happened and then this next thing happened because, and so on. Such sequentiality is largely a convention of story, and rare in life where we frequently cannot recognize much causal sequence about any group of occurrences. "I don't know why this happened," we often say. But it did, though we cannot see any sequential reasons for it. This is a convention of conventional story, this ABC sequence of events dominating its structure. I think that often it must be destroyed before we can get at the best treasure fiction can hold for us. Chronology dominates our physical life, perhaps, but there is no such necessity in the possibilities of our imagination.

There are also two dragons of understanding lurking in *More Saskatchewan Gold*. First is the dragon of limited experience. This is a particular problem for the young writer, and as a teacher of creative writing for most of my adult life I am perhaps more aware of this than any human being on earth should have to

be. Young people try to write stories on the models of Leo Tolstoy, who wrote superbly at thirty and at sixty-five. Some of us live faster than others, however, and some of us do not really have thirty years experience but more like one year's experience thirty times over, which is quite different. We all do have childhoods, however, and in writing classes childhood stories often abound, as they do in this book. One-third of it is devoted to childhood stories, and some of them are very good, but we all basically have a naïve memory of our childhood: we either romanticize it in terms of its beauty or in terms of its pain. I have a brother-in-law, for example, who says, "Oh I had a terrible childhood," and his sister, to whom I happen to be married, says, "I can't remember any of that as horror at all." We romanticize it one way or another, or we ascribe much too much understanding to it. At its worst that can turn into the world according to Walt Disney in whose early movies the children understood everything and the parents were so dull or prejudiced they could never grasp the most elemental human situations. The suffering child, the wise but helpless child: the dragon in inexperience forces the young writer into this over-used narrative convention.

The last and largest of the dragons, the real horror that faces writers—and if we recall that amalgam of eagle, lion, crocodile, and snake fused by fire—the most awesome is the dragon of the limited imagination. Writing is a matter of seeing, and of seeing *differently*. Patrick Lane talks about that to some extent, of seeing with our own particular genius and yet seeing differently as well. While reading these stories I notice time and again that their characters, their responses, their ways of talking, are clichés. I have read it all before, so often. Clichés appear because some writers do not read enough, and for that no Canadian has any possible excuse. We are wealthy and can read the two richest literatures in the world. English alone is written everywhere on the globe and more books are translated into it than any other language. If you look at the difficulty the Japanese, for example, face in this regard, the contrast is staggering because of their very difficult language and its extremely complex method of writing. Chinese writing is so complex that a person can spend a lifetime simply learning how to read it. English is much simpler, and if anyone wants to write, she/he must read. Whoever wants to write and does not read is not putting forth the effort to conquer this fourth dragon because the imagination is like a muscle—it must be exercised to make it grow stronger. There are innumerable beauties we cannot even imagine, as I have found again and again in my own writing when I am stopped, blocked by the wall of my inability to imagine something. While writing *My Lovely Enemy* I found myself working towards a conclusion which

I could not find. I did not know how or where, if ever, the story could end until suddenly one morning about five o'clock it came to me in a burst of something breaking open: Of course! But I had not been able to imagine it before. Only after six weeks of absolutely concentrated writing, doing nothing else, away from everyone and every distraction, living by myself and getting into my own kind of rhythm (which I suddenly discovered was not working early in the morning and then doing something else but rather working from ten p.m. till two or three in the morning and then falling asleep and waking up at five—I had never known that I could even write a word like this) could I break past the dragon of my un-imagination. The most fearful dragon of all.

The way to exorcize that mighty dragon is to read: read everything, junk as well as good stuff. Do not worry about the junk; if your mind is any good you will retain only what is useful, what is stimulating. And if it bores you, throw it aside because boredom can teach you nothing.

Golden fiction is extremely difficult to discover and when I say that in *More Saskatchewan Gold* I do not find one brilliant piece of golden fiction I am not really saying anything disparaging. I am, however, recalling the *Beowulf* poet who said, "Let only the bold fight dragons." There are many bold writers in Saskatchewan, but I know we will not triumph if we underestimate the dragons.

NOTES

1. Geoffrey Ursell, ed., *More Saskatchewan Gold* (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1984).
2. Fred Stenson, ed., *Alberta Bound: Thirty Stories by Alberta Writers* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1986).
3. Geoffrey Ursell, ed., *Saskatchewan Gold* (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1982).

Contemporary Saskatchewan Poetry

FRED WAH

How magnetic and mysterious place is. But problematic. Consider, for example, British Columbia poet Derk Wynand's poem "Late Entry," first published in *Grain*.[1] It contains such overt prairie references (sheaf, wind, husks, field, sun, crops, golden) that I asked him if he was from the prairies. He isn't. I like Eli Mandel's notion that "it is not place alone that matters but a direction, an attraction—something like the movement of a compass needle; not where it is, but where it points matters."[2] This works for me because, even though there have been persistent attempts to define the regional character of the writing, the tropisim of the poetry, its formal and specifically poetic tendencies, matters as well.

The Lyric

The lyric poem is still the standard poetic form in English, and in Saskatchewan. Its main formal feature continues to be the line as the primary unit of composition. It is still the prototypical poem of feeling, of emotional reaction. But the lyric has also come to provide a point of condensation for story-telling, a narrative of relationships, profiles, iconographies, and world views. It is frequently the catch-all form for the anti-literary or naïve poem since the lyric poem is seen as the traditional form for personal poetry. The contemporary Saskatchewan lyric poem typically fits into lyric patterns (almost formulas) like lyrics anywhere else.

Typical of the "I/you" lyric with its cryptic clincher is Elizabeth Allen's poem "jade," with its clean, uncluttered syntax rooted in things. Here is the last stanza:

> I touch
> the small jade tiki
> on my throat
> smooth rounded
> warm from my body
> like the touchstone
> in your pocket
> you do not show me[3]

When the "I/you" lyric works well, it often offers a complex of solitary, sometimes lonely, reflection. It is the song-in-the-world to oneself, the subjective as objective, the private as public. Lorna Crozier is one of the most skillful lyric poets from this province and the last two stanzas of her poem "Mid-February" illustrate how the private soul appropriates the things of her surrounding world to extend the song to something tangible:

> Through flowers I watch
> your red mitts following
> the axe, the image of the bird
> held in glass. I cup
> the colours to my eyes
> to wash away the hours
> when I couldn't show my care
> or feel the simple joy
> of flowers and a bird.
>
> As you pile wood
> in the crook of your arm
> the bird stretches its wings.
> Up from the warm throat
> its song rises in the snow,
> in the slow heart.[4]

The same lyric skill is compounded in one of the most powerful books of lyric poetry published by Saskatchewan poets, *No Longer Two People*, a collaboration by Crozier and Patrick Lane. The "I" in this series about a literal and metaphorical relationship becomes almost emblematic, depersonified; we are not sure which voice is which. In the following exchange the poets establish some bird-like homogeneities:

> And geese wing into silence
> away from the
> cold that crawls
> towards us, levelling mountain
> into prairie. Our fear lies
> in recognition. For once the thing is
> named, it will not leave
> but hang around your neck
> like every bird you killed
> and track my scent like every wound
> I left behind in snow.

. . . . . .

You will find me
like this when you return:
head sewn into belly,
back broken, and the flesh
zippered with needles,
black stitches
tracks of missing birds.[5]

Patrick Lane has published an unusual and extended treatment of his obsessive bird images in *A Linen Crow, A Caftan Magpie*. I mention this work, "a composite of the haiku and ghazal,"[6] in the context of the lyric because Lane has become a significant and masterful poet of the lyric and the book is a welcome exploration into something new. It extends the lyrical voice, but still, as he says in this stanza,

As the line moves. The leap!
thrashing there.[7]

He has authored numerous other books of poetry but his *Old Mother* is a prime example of his lyrical finesse and of work completed since he moved from British Columbia to Saskatchewan.

Time and space forbid much more but one should note, also, Elizabeth Brewster's classical control of the lyric; the dissatisfaction with the inherited lyrical breath-line in the poems of Anne Campbell, Brenda Niskala and Victor Jerret Enns; the continuing strength of the traditional twentieth-century lyric in the work of John V. Hicks, H.C. Dillow, and Lewis Horne; strong and sometimes singular collections from Geoffrey Ursell, Gertrude Story, Barbara Sapergia, Doris Hillis, Thelma Poirier, Jean Hillabold, Elizabeth Philips, Gerald Hill, Terrence Heath, Gary Raddysh, and Nancy Senior. And, of course, a lot of this poetry is more than simply lyric.

Vernacular and Anecdote

Any narrative tendency in Saskatchewan poetry in the past five years can best be seen in the continuation of what Eli Mandel describes as "the main trend. . . toward vernacular and anecdote."[8] The poems written in this trend are still lyric in form (short breath-line, stanzaic, centred on the "I") but, rather than being a

soulful outpouring of feelings and images, they describe events, situations, and characters. And the voices are mostly male.

Co-founder of Thistledown Press Glen Sorestad is perhaps the most prolific practitioner of this common Canadian storytelling poem that might almost be prose but for the line breaks. And Stephen Scriver's marketing of his *All Star Poet* has made his hockey poem-stories known across the country. Other writers in this mode include Robert Currie, Don Kerr, Dennis Gruending, Jim McLean, and Gary Hyland. One particularly interesting aspect of this verse is that it scripts the vernacular. Andy Suknaski, of course, hones in on this in some of his longer forms. And here is evidence of Gary Hyland's ear for colloquial speech in his poem "Mr. Kroski":

> We swiped his corn whenever it was politic
> "Yewz-boyz-ban-rusalin-diz-corn?" he'd yell across the creek
> "No sir, Mr. Kroski." Goot-coz-I-Sprayed-her-all-wiz-arzanic."[9]

Some of the collections of storytelling poetry, like Robert Currie's *Yarrow*, nearly take on the shape of a collection of short stories. What is interesting in all this is that there is an incredible push (need, desire) towards telling in Saskatchewan poetry.

The Long Poem

A more poetically engaging use of the story, and a form that engages more compositional possibilities, occurs when the lyric gives way to the longer and more tenuous structures such as the long poem. These are usually narrative, frequently historical, documentary, or biographical, and formally wide open. The primary thrust is to play off and against the sense of finality and enclosure of the shorter lyric poem.

Undoubtedly the major long poem voice in Saskatchewan is Andrew Suknaski. His elegiac bursts and summations of invisible geographies, family and ethnic anecdotes, personal cosmologies, are actualized in a number of publications. *Wood Mountain Poems* (1976) has been a major influence on the vernacular and anecdotal tendencies on the prairies and elsewhere. Suknaski's other books also throb with vitality and vista. In a blurb quoted on the last page of *Silk Trail*, he says he is "mostly concerned with finding a cipher that will decode a fourfold dream." His search is his poem, "a scanning of/the world line/ . . .to glimpse/ones/soul" where "Light"

rules all
co-ordinates
of heart

earth
and ordinary
things[10]

There are several other Saskatchewan poets who have worked in long forms. Donna O'Sullivan has published a trilogy of what she calls "poetic fiction" (*Excerpts From an Anonymous Life*, *Alleged Reflections*, *Foregone Conclusions*). One of the most linguistically active collections to come out of the prairies recently is Helen Hawley's *Grasshopper*. And Ed Dyck's *Odpoems* and *Mossbank Canon* illustrate other engaging structural and generative possibilities in the extended forms.

The Prose Poem

This tendency to extend the play of the poetic paradigms, to resist the closure of the inherited lyric form, has resulted also, throughout English-language poetry, in a turn towards the "prose poem." Formally, the line is simply ignored as the basic substance of the writing event and usually replaced by a focus on syntax.

Two Saskatchewan women have shown particular adeptness in exploring this form. Brenda Riches's *Dry Media* is a palpable juxtaposition of different texts (journal, poem, dialogue) in an intense assault on syntax. And Anne Szumigalski's *Doctrine of Signatures* is one of the most significant publications in the genre in Canada. It is an outstanding collection of poetic writing, much of it prose poetry. Not just the intensity of connections and image building stand out, but also the speed and compactness of the juxtapositions brought about by a disjunctive syntax. For example:

> my nibs and quills arranged before me on a stained deal table I am designing the alphabet for a new language called in that tongue *speech of the foxes* because the consonants fall on the ear like the yipping of reynard in the henrun because when a woman enunciates the vowels they sound the human cry of a vixen in heat[11]

Szumigalski's earlier writing in *Wild Man's Butte* (in collaboration with Terrence Heath) and *Risks* show her consistently pushing beyond the limits of the

lyric form, and her recent book *Instar* is yet a further exploration of the prose-poetry overlap.

Publishing

How the writing is made public, how it is shared within the community, is usually a good indication of the writing life. In the past ten years Saskatchewan has supported one of the most substantial literary publishing programmes in the country, and most of it from several small writer-originated presses; besides Turnstone in Winnipeg and Longspoon in Edmonton, there are Coteau Books in Moose Jaw, Thistledown and Fifth House in Saskatoon.

By far the most significant publishing event to come out of the prairies in the past decade has been the magazine *Grain*. It has been crucially instrumental in the development of contemporary Saskatchewan poetry.

And then there are the self-publishers like Mildred Rose and Catherine Buckaway. And the prolific Mick Burrs and his Waking Image Press have distributed sixteen titles in the past fifteen years at farmers' markets and arts and craft shows around Yorkton.

Finally

The boundaries of contemporary Saskatchewan poetry do extend beyond the horizon because there are also those of us who have appropriated something Saskatchewan because we lived here once and because we encounter the spirit of the place rising to the surface of an image or clinging to the roots of a word now and then. One needs to note, in this context, writers like Lala Koehn, Kristjana Gunnars, and Dennis Cooley. Cooley, whose long poem *Fielding* is a grandiloquent testimony to prairie genealogy and geography, has also been one of the most acute critical presences for prairie writing through his editing of *Re-Placing*, a collection of critical essays on prairie writing, and *Draft*, an anthology of prairie poetry.

Two major Canadian writers who are more significant presences in Saskatchewan writing than active participants in it are Eli Mandel and John Newlove. The importance of their involvements and contributions go without saying here.

A recent issue of *Grain* includes a number of poems by Saskatchewan children. What is noticeable in these young poets' writings is that references to place and story have given way to imaginative figments, abstractions, and concerns with forms. There are rhymes, limericks, villanelles, centred lines, and,

with acknowledgement to Pat Lane's *A Linen Crow, A Caftan Magpie*, a lot of ghazals. Here's a striking piece by Neil Kapoor, age eight:

> Jump to God
> Your bones fall down[12]

Conclusion

In surveying the landscape of contemporary Saskatchewan poetry, I have defined a particular and personal view. The poetry itself is varied in form and content and not as qualified by the landscape as I first thought. Some of it, particularly the anecdotal, is derivative and repetitious, though generated, as Ed Dyck points out, by a "natural" rhetorical stance.[13] Some of the lyric poets (Newlove, Lane, and Crozier, for example) have provided masterful models for that form, much beyond a regional use. And the more singular and experimental voices in the long and prose poems (Mandel, Suknaski, Szumigalski, for example) have provided exciting alternative poetic processes. This to say, there is no easy qualification of the range of poetry being written in this province. It has an irresistible vitality and there is a lot of it.

Postscript

I'd like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Jerry Rush. He had a sensitive ear to language possibilities and formal considerations, and he could make the use of the vernacular in a poem interesting. For example, in "Hill Talk":

> whole damn hill a jesus forest once
> see them pockety holes clean from
> his coyote head to his slumpin tail-end
> burnouts—all across this grass
> hundreds years ago some big jesus fire
> took the whole mess—wiped him clean
> smoldered all them big trunks
> down into their own graves
> damnedest thing—not one tree left
> here to the cypress hills—nothing except
> those pockety burnouts—raise hell with a horse
> don't go riding none up there
> come nightfall[14]

Rush's second book of poems, *The Bones of their Occasion*, is an intriguing collection of poetry in terms of the dichotomy between the lyric and extended

forms I have mentioned above because Rush's intelligent apprehension of the poem allows him to go in either direction. The book, in that sense, can perhaps be considered a quintessential collection of contemporary Saskatchewan poetry. There are exemplary lyrical poems, anecdotes, and expanded forms—all full of a natural and particular prairie imagery. Here is "Saskatchewan: southwest."

> east of the rockies
> south and west of hudson bay
> at the spidery tops of rivers
> crawling to the gulf
> earth's single moon
> floods a vast plain
>
> inside the emptiness
> across the short grass
> roll
> with the spin of earth
> a few
> lone souls
> following the seasons[15]

Jerry Rush's poems show a creative intelligence dealing with the proposition that there are subtle songs in language and the poet must reveal these however and wherever they occur. That Rush does this with skill may or may not have anything to do with the fact that he was a Saskatchewan poet, but he is.

NOTES

1. Derk Wynand, "Late Entry," *Grain* 8 (November 1980): 20.
2. Eli Mandel, "Writing West: On the Road to Wood Mountain," in *Another Time* (Erin: Press Porcepic, 1977), 69.
3. Elizabeth Allen, "jade," in *A Shored Up House* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1980), 13.
4. Lorna Crozier, "Mid-February," in *The Weather* (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1983), 17.
5. Patrick Lane and Lorna Uher (Crozier), *No Longer Two People* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1979), 25-27.
6. Patrick Lane, *A Linen Crow, A Caftan Magpie* (Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 1984), np.
7. Ibid.
8. David Arnason, Dennis Cooley and Robert Enright, "Interview with Eli Mandel," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 18/19 (Summer/Fall 1980): 88.
9. Gary Hyland, "Mr. Kroski," in *Street of Dreams* (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1984), 21.
10. Andrew Suknaski, *Silk Trail* (Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1985), 90-91.

11. Anne Szumigalski, *Doctrine of Signatures* (Saskatoon, Fifth House, 1983), 23.
12. Neil Kapoor, "A ghazal," *Grain* 14 (May 1986): 41.
13. E.F. Dyck, "Introduction," in *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing*, ed. E.F. Dyck (Regina: Saskatchewan Writers Guild, 1986), xvii.
14. Jerry Rush, "Hill Talk 1," in *Earth Dreams* (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1982), 9.
15. Jerry Rush, "Saskatchewan: southwest," in *The Bones of Their Occasion: Poems New and Selected* (Dunvegan, Ont.: Cormorant Books, 1986), 92.

The Ghost of Edward McCourt

GEOFF HANCOCK

My Dad is from metaphysical Maple Creek—old Cow Town. My relatives live in Eastend at the eastern end of the Cypress Hills and in Piapot, named after the first Cree Chief to refuse to sign a treaty and go on a reservation. He is famous for pitching his tent in front of the Canadian Pacific Railway right of way and having a Mountie kick the poles over. Piapot was a modernist; he had his village certainty, that pull toward the centre, to keep him in balance. He had a society, a tradition—realism, in his terms—a shaman, a wife, a matrix, and everything held for him. But the North West Mounted Police and the Canadian Pacific Railway were postmodern: significance is what they say it is, and history is whatever selection most favours their cultural thesis. Inward chaos, flux, motion, and often self-surprise: that was the Canadian Pacific Railway. That is why Piapot stood on the tracks at the mythic crossroads of the old world of culture and the new world of technology. We still oscillate back and forth in Canada, working out this technological experience. Stillness and pride face the dislocation and the seizure of history.

I am from outside Saskatchewan now, looking in at the residue of this modernist authority, and perhaps at my deepest roots. But I did not come here to rediscover my origins. As editor of a national literary magazine I am in federal politics, literarily speaking, not provincial. It is from this vantage point that I want to comment on Ed Dyck's *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing*.

On a visit to Saskatchewan a few years ago, I went to a small Hallowe'en party at David Carpenter's house. He told me that the ghost of Edward McCourt lived in his basement. McCourt was born in Ireland, grew up in Alberta, earned degrees from the University of Alberta, and as a Rhodes Scholar, he received a Master of Arts degree from Oxford. He later taught at Upper Canada College, University of New Brunswick, Queen's University, and, for the last twenty-eight years of his life until 1972, at the University of Saskatchewan. Though he wrote several novels, he is best known as a critic for his 1949 book *The Canadian West in Fiction*. He also wrote three travel books, and three books for young people on the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. And now his ghost is in David Carpenter's basement. How am I to understand this everyday world of

Saskatchewan, then? In a postmodern world you can't even trust the guy to stay dead.

If his ghost really is in David Carpenter's basement, surely that will shape the kinds of literary questions we must ask about Saskatchewan writing. Unless Carpenter was putting me on, it is also a major challenge to Dyck's thesis that McCourt is too omniscient as an author.[1] If he wasn't then, he certainly is now. Nor can I speculate whether or not David Carpenter is postmodern, cleft by doubt and anxiety about this ghost in his basement. All I know is, the centre cannot hold. With modernism, we could count on widening gyres, hollow men and wastelands—they smashed assumptions, but at least the artist could pledge to the self and stay true. The artist was whole, consummate. But what now? Edward McCourt can't decide whether to stay or go. To stay or to go, what's the difference?

What methodology do we use to understand this? Semiotics? Semi-idiotics? Ideology? Psychology? Do we have a heroic figure here? Someone mythic and grand? This is proof that Saskatchewan is too immense, unprecedented, strange and fragmented to be held together by anything but writing.

I am attracted to science and history as much as to creative writing these days. What an energy for life Saskatchewan writers have, what abundance, what fertility of imagination! Their works are densely populated, full of eccentrics, marginal figures who test the society. They move from types to grotesques, and we cannot have full knowledge of society unless we see these variants beyond the typical. But I am thinking a bit like a scientist here as well. In both quantum mechanics and field theory, which I will discuss later, the observer of an event also participates in that event. I think that this observation will have profound implications for the future of writing in Saskatchewan. This is where I depart from W.O. Mitchell's Brian O'Connal, who is more a mere observer, instead of a dynamic, mutually interacting, undetachable part of the experience.

I see creative writing as the national art. Writing with the scope and freshness to go with the ideals of the new Canada, which is basically a postwar experience. We have a modern art, a new world, and Saskatchewan is more than the common denominator of land and sky, as W.O. Mitchell would have it. Saskatchewan is this and more. Writers force new perceptions of reality on the world. They question how to approach daily life, speech, names, the class structure. They ask, how do you describe this place? That is why the ghost of Edward McCourt interests me. How does he experience the passing of time in David Carpenter's basement?

We all know, looking through microscopes, binoculars, and telescopes, the disparity between what the naked eye sees and what is really there. Perhaps I am inclined to agree with David Arnason when he writes Saskatchewan writers are craft competent but vision deficient.[2]

I thought of McCourt recently when I read David Carpenter's editorial in the December 1986 *NeWest Review*. Carpenter notes, "feeling in contemporary fiction seems suspect."[3] He criticizes the influence of Borges, Barth, Calvino, Garcia Marquez, magic realism, stories about the writing of stories and writers writing about writing. He notes "a tedious accumulation of stories emulating—sometimes imitating—the inventions of South American, (or the Americans, or the French and Italians) to such an extent that we've come close to losing our own idiom." This he defines as "the language we use to curse the neighbour's stereo, to tell off the boss, to tell a good joke, to gossip about the widow down the street, to figure out the world after work in the bar." David, you must have forgotten that McCourt lived in your basement.

This article saddened and disturbed me. My bias is towards the new in the New World. I have written a great deal about my concepts of the marvelous. For me the artist is not isolated from the mainstream of social life. My interest in surrealism and fiction of the marvelous is to reintegrate art and life, as André Breton and Tristan Tzara said it should. The fragment means that everybody can have a bit of art. The *objet trouvé* mocks the high-priced crafts of art. Carpenter's essay depressed me for another reason. It made me pessimistic about the possibility of an avant garde to make headway against the mass culture of twentieth-century capitalism. Canada turns into a giant shopping mall. I don't want to be part of mass Canadian culture, which argues against the real attempts of creative artists. Perhaps, though, McCourt was waiting to be thought about again, and not grouped according to a historical organization that isolates and often trivializes.

Surely, if McCourt or the idea of McCourt in Carpenter's basement bears some consideration, it has great implications for the future of writing in this province. Ideas, after all, have feelings too. A fiction does not have to be set in a recognizably human world. I do not see the author's mind as a safe place. Nor do I think a story needs to permit me to feel what it is like to be someone else. The nature and meaning of fiction in the twentieth century has changed. Fiction is a form of writing, an architecture of words, a field of theory. All fiction is philosophy, is aesthetics, and is problematic. What do we write about? How?

Why? The modernist and postmodernist impulses have changed the way we write. We can't help it.

We can't help it any more than we can avoid that big sky. We need a large sky, a large landscape, and large chunks of geological time if we are to be sympathetic to large ideas. The geology, palaeontology, and astronomy of Saskatchewan show how young we are in this place. Art has many modes of perception—Theatre of the Absurd, twelve-tone music, instinctive dance, Expressionist painting—which Saskatchewan artists need to explore.

Important laws of physics, and nature, and hence of narrative and creative writing, are still waiting to be discovered. To reduce arguments cannot give us useful information about the interconnectedness of things, the wholes that are more than the sum of their parts. There is a mystical universe out there and it is populated by poltergeists, and somewhere beyond the substratum (the space between the particles of atoms) there is something that some theorists say is pure information. Perhaps there is where McCourt resides. A place that challenges chronology. A place where the future can affect the past, and each observer creates his own reality. Creative inquiry, in art as in science, keeps us moving forward in the secret universe that is Saskatchewan. Science, like literature, is a response to general sets of ideas pervasive in society, and it is easy to discover the relationships between modern novelistic techniques and certain scientific theories.

It's not so easy, however, to find a writer in Canada who comes close to the imaginative verve of Italo Calvino, or the genius of Jorge Luis Borges, or has the aesthetic discipline of Alain Robbe-Grillet at his finest. I find few works that alienate, disturb, provoke, or upset traditional prairie values. Nor does any writer in Canada deal with history with the revolutionary aim of the historical novel as do Carlos Fuentes in *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or Mario Vargas Llosa in *The War of the End of the World*. The techniques of such visionary modes of perception could, I am sure, enrich and enlighten the literature of the prairies and of Canada. We need more novelists to reexamine the stereotypes of our history, to bring the large sweep of history and great events down to the personal and individual level.

I have recently read and mis-read three extraordinary fictions of Saskatchewan: E.T. Russell's *What's in a Name: A Guide to Saskatchewan Place Names*, Gerald Friesen's *The Canadian Prairie: A History*, and *The Saskatchewan Vacation Guide*. What meaning there is in naming and the loss of

names. Saskatchewan is a ruthless place. Moving at great speed, in a state of flux. The language of this place is like my sense of the country, inventing itself, and losing itself. The high and low forms, the formal and informal, are so close together they cast no shadow and cannot be told apart. The real and the irreal. Edward McCourt and his ghost.

Many criticisms might be made about the influence of European and American thought on Saskatchewan, but no one has yet spoken of the opposite phenomenon, the impact of Saskatchewan on European, American, and Australian thought and history. Perhaps we should write our essays in reverse. We need to emphasize the conceptual role of Saskatchewan in modernizing the Old World. The single theme of Saskatchewan writing is innovation: an ever widening sense of discoveries, not chanced upon, but deliberately sought. Saskatchewan might be seen as a messianic place, on a new continent free of the corruption and oppression of the Old World. Perhaps two traditions coexist here: a modest place, a realistic, pragmatic, practical place, and on the other hand an ideal, a second chance at redemption, a gamble in defiance of history and theology.

There is a hint here of an ethical and political ideal: works of art imply who the art belongs to. Prairie art is radically fresh. It belongs to us to live the life the writing comes from and calls us to account. Our basic materials are transformed. So there is also, at a political level, a critique of culture that comes from within. At another level, questions of authority are raised. Who preserves the literature? Who controls it? Whose version is most current? As Gerald Friesen writes in his history of the prairies, we have virtually ignored native history, neglected the period 1900-30, and misunderstood the Depression decade of 1930-40.[4] We are only beginning to understand regionalism and alienation of the 1970s. Another book, *Prairie Fire*,[5] by Bob Beal and Rod MacLeod, is a revisionist history of the 1885 Northwest Rebellion. The authors revise previous histories and point out the complexity of the Plains Cree and the South Branch Métis society. We need to seriously and continually reevaluate the ways in which we see the West in the late twentieth century.

As I read Ed Dyck's anthology I frequently thought of the ghost of Edward McCourt. I like oddities, marvels, mind readers, peculiar performances, stories of the unusual, the strange quirks and glorious victories of our species. So I found a few weaknesses in the book, and offer this revisionist challenge for future editions. The New Critics focussed on the text, instead of on ideas generated by the text. As a result there is a naïve treatment of history as background or con-

text for literary work. There is an unexamined creation of a literary canon and the vision of a past which is conserved. Tradition colours the books that have survived. They are perceived through categories which need to be recognized and evaluated. Why does fiction begin with Sinclair Ross? Ed Dyck points out how readings of Ross have varied, from virtual neglect to a most recent feminist focus on Mrs. Bentley.[6] I'd like to reconstruct Saskatchewan literary history and make a virtue of dissension. In reading this book, I felt the political values of the white family group are favoured over those of women, Indians, and Asians. Where are the essays on women's writing? Where are the diaries, the journals? Where are the explorers' notes and journals? To have a tradition, we must draw upon what we have, and ask ourselves again, what constitutes a "literature"? There's a need to rethink the beginning of Saskatchewan history. Why for example, is Jacques Cartier considered the beginning of Quebec literature, while Anthony Henday does not have the same position in prairie literature?

Why does *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing* seem so Euro-Centric? Critics like Arun Mukherjee and Una Parameswaran have noted we need a new literature or a literary consciousness to define itself, to understand what is peculiar to it, the experience that their own traditions bring with it, and how this new literature interacts, both in literary and social realms, with the Canadian tradition. "This book is about writing in English by the people of Saskatchewan," the first sentence declares. The references to prototypical aliens, "not WASP aliens," must be elaborated if we are to understand this place. The response may be realistic or romantic. but there are other forms of alienation: racism, enforced obscurity. What must Ven Begamudré and Saros Cowasjee write about here to be here? A gender conscious reading, "sexual politics," can offer other inciteful readings. For example, where is Sandra Djwa's response to Robert Kroetsch?[7] I am also interested in "lost literatures," the pictographs and petroglyphs.

Our assumptions about what constitutes reality are largely determined by the theories and inventions of modern science. A world without Freud, Jung, Heisenberg, Watson, Crick, Darwin, and Einstein is impossible for modern fiction writers to even contemplate. Changes in scientific world views lead to changes in literature and popular culture. Science contains the great imaginative movements of our time. Our reaction to it is part of the paradigm shift in culture to the field concepts of modern physics. Words like entropy, Cantor's theory of infinite sets, Schrodinger's cat, singularity, black holes, strange loops, the incompleteness theorem, relativity, ego, id, quantum, thermodynamics, and DNA

are part of our vocabulary. Esoteric physical concepts, particle spin, tunnel effect, and the wave-particle nature of light also suggest new ways of interpreting reality. Writers such as Gaddis and Pynchon might even be considered poets of entropy. Yet all of these theories are based on a respect for the natural world, which makes Saskatchewan such an ideal place for the new fiction of the future.

When Carpenter talks about the safe confines of an author's mind, he is totally wrong. Each mind evolves its own universe, which is usually orderly, regulated, and compartmented. But beware of a sudden breaking of the rules—a revelation that makes all things clear. One remembers that no questions went unanswered, but forgets that none were asked. Perception is influenced by our expectation of what we are going to see or sense. New ideas may have to break through the restriction imposed by previous ideas or skills. Emotion becomes one variety of thought. We are all implicated in these problems. How we solve them depends upon the varying degrees of our knowledge and sympathy towards science.

The revenge of art, the resurgence of pure aesthetics, began in the 1950s. The search for beauty led to an accurate description of nature with the discovery of the first unknown particles, quarks, by Murray Gell-Mann, who won the Nobel Prize for his discovery. The extraordinary is the consequence of what seemed trivial. Slow movements over time cause the most profound change. The most intoxicating triumphs of physics involve the grand unified theories of completely unifying all the fundamental forces of subatomic particles. What will nature be content to show us? Can this lead to new concepts of character, and with that a change in narrative? What will be the underlying spiritual motivations and religious beliefs?

In her book *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century*,[8] N. Kathleen Hayles suggests all activities take place at once, in a cosmic web, a network of events, a vast energy field. Events are not isolated, but are part of the field which is in constant motion, rendered dynamic by interactions that simultaneously affect each other. The field model renders causality obsolete. Culture is a social matrix, a climate of opinions that makes some questions interesting and others irrelevant. That's what makes Kroetsch's *Field Notes* so interesting.

Some critics argue narrative change takes place rapidly, after a long period of stasis. The French and American models rapidly challenged the traditions of realism. Borges challenged the myths of coherence and continuity of structure. What is called postmodernism in criticism and texts is post-Newtonian in

science. The problem is the same: how to articulate a dynamic, mutually interacting field with linear, fragmentary, and unidirectional language. Novelists, like scientists, need to solve this major problem in literary strategy. As we say in creative writing, we have the desire to find first a form, then the language, adequate to interpret its human meaning. Theorists such as Michel Foucault and Edward Said say historical abruptness transforms how we know and think. To begin anything is discontinuous. How can linear narratives be possible?

Freudian narrative resolution leads to interpretation as it rationalizes dreams and fantasies with external and normal perspectives. But I prefer the internal, a conversion of archytepal images and patterns that defy analysis and rationalization. For me, and I'll bet for McCourt, now, the fantastic turns towards the psyche and creativity. Not towards interpretation, but learning to be. Visions of death, darkness, or absence are parts of the psyche that cannot be explained. An other sense of self. Meaning comes from conflict between contradictory values.

What to do with this land which is experienced and explored, travelled and dwelled upon? There are a variety of approaches. I recently broadcast a programme entitled "The Prehistoric Art of Canadian Writing" on CBC radio. I showed how virtually every Canadian writer is affected by the primitive and the prehistoric, by stones, trees, sacred groves, pictographs, underground springs, and sacred sites. This is how we confront the variety of our physical and cultural environment. It may be strange, free, original. Back to the past, as Ursell seems to be going. The experience may be realistic, though not the treatment. Andreas Schroeder's *Dust Ship Glory* raises some serious questions. What is the nature of reality? Has realism run its course in literature? Is a fiction merely an architecture of words?

Like folk art, with its essential poetry, authenticity and accuracy. Humans are always recentred in folk art. That creates a metaphysical problem, the problem of language. It always places man at the centre of significance. Yet as good old Jacques Derrida says, language implies presence, assumes a reality ultimately accessible. But there is nothing in nature to correspond to what the word "Saskatchewan" implies—it is a perceptively transforming aggregation of organisms, all different, all unpredictable. I do not want to imply that there is nothing out there to correspond to this word, "Saskatchewan." But is there a "presence" beyond, or outside words? A presence that is not "ideal," something "unstable," unreliably related to the language used to describe it? To speak of Saskatchewan is to create, or presuppose, a separation between word and object that reality would deny.

Would Edward McCourt see art as nostalgic? In the past tense? Art of time and memory, a past with its own shape and mythology. Grain bins, sod houses, stone boats; the large triumvirate of horse, bull, dinosaur, the great beasts of the prairies. But dinosaurs are now thought to have been warmblooded, related to birds, to have leapt instead of waddled, and perhaps even to have travelled in herds. Let us not have disrespect for nonhuman species. Terrible forces are with us. The weather report never lies. Yet only 150 years ago, geologists argued whether the fossil record was caused by the Lord's Flood or His Fire. Only twenty-five years ago, the concept of plate tectonics was news. Nothing is stable, nothing is static. Plants travel, seeds grow, our own bodies are mysteriously active, with auras and energy fields, as anyone who has had an acupuncture treatment knows. Edward McCourt, perhaps, stays around to see how we rethink the literature, the other arts, the sciences, and how we integrate ourselves back to the source. There is a life force in Saskatchewan, as there is in sushi and sashimi. That is why our literary diet must change, and it keeps Edward McCourt with us, in David Carpenter's basement, or perhaps in our hearts and minds.

NOTES

1. E.F. Dyck, "Introduction," in *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing*, ed. E.F. Dyck (Regina: Saskatchewan Writers Guild, 1986), xiv.
2. David Arnason, "Leaving the Farm: Contemporary Saskatchewan Fiction," in *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing*, 113-25.
3. David Carpenter, "Polemic on Fiction," *NeWest Review* (December 1986) :2.
4. Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).
5. Bob Beal and Rod MacLeod, *Prairie Fire: The 1885 North-West Rebellion* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1984).
6. Dyck, "Introduction," xi-xii.
7. Sandra Djwa, "Response: The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," in *Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*, ed. Dick Harrison (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1979), 84-88.
8. N. Kathleen Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

The Saskatchewan Novel: Voice and Vision

WAYNE TEFS

Voice and *vision*, the two nouns I have chosen for the title of this essay, are admittedly broad terms when applied to an entire genre such as the novel. The former suggests the way in which the novel over a long period has given voice to places and made them come alive, not only for people who have spent their lives in certain locales but hosts of others as well. Writers as well as readers. It is thus voice which is one key element in Hardy's evocation of Wessex and Margaret Laurence's evocation of Manawaka. It accounts, perhaps, for the fact that generations of readers feel an intimate connection with these writers' characters and understand their values, mores, and ethics without ever having visited the county of Dorset or even heard of Manawaka. This aspect of narrative reconstitutes landscape and imitates character in exciting, illuminating ways. Mimetic in nature, when effectively at work it is compelling, delivering pleasurable doses of familiarity and recognition. In an important way voice has been closely connected with a renaissance in Saskatchewan writing that has given readers a renewed appreciation of the spirit of this place.

Vision, as distinct from voice, refers to the role of narrative consciousness in a fiction, a sense that some writing creates of placing human intelligence at the centre of its narrative frame. Critical here is the intuition of a shaping genius in a fiction, the play of mind over the matter of experience—and also the play of fancy, invention, and whimsy. In the nineteenth century English novel the distinction might be appreciated as the difference between fictions dominated by Hardy's Immanent Will and those subject to Joyce's God-like artist. The distinction is not, it should be clear, between the traditional and the experimental. All fiction contains and expresses both. It lies rather in the role within a given fiction of the formative human mind, what has been known since the Romantics as the Imagination: that capacity not only to render accurately the experiences of a human community but to represent its potentialities and possibilities as well. To shape as well as imitate.

Clearly in both categories degree is important, for almost all novels of vision

are characterized by voice; and most novels of voice contain elements of vision. And the terms are not, I admit, wholly satisfactory, vision being coloured with romantic associations to Blake, Coleridge, and Keats, and hence privileged. Voice, on the other hand, sounds to my ears rather technical (as in "voice-over"), and hence somewhat cold. They are, however, useful terms, and I use them conscious both of the dangers involved and of the real distinction between them.

The Saskatchewan novel, particularly in recent years, has been characterized by a clear and winning voice. The works of Rudy Wiebe, W.O. Mitchell, Barbara Sapergia, Robert Currie, Byrna Barclay, Ken Mitchell, David Williams, Max Braithwaite, and others (not to mention practitioners of the short story) have evoked this place with sensitivity, sympathy, and intelligence: no reader of recent Saskatchewan fiction can fail to discover a definite and palpable sense of this place, nor the conviction that this landscape is not only different from others but distinctively, vibrantly, so.

Much of that conviction springs from the skill with which writers such as Sharon Butala have employed slice-of-life realism to re-create and animate the locales, the peoples, the culture of this place. We sense, perhaps, what reviewers are apt to call accurate re-creation of experience. Here is one of Butala's characters in *Country of the Heart* reflecting on her childhood home:

> The other home, the true home, lingered in the back of her mind, as though she had been taken from there only yesterday. The kitchen floor sloped, its linoleum worn down to the floorboards in the doorway and in front of the sink. On the kitchen table was a blue and green flowered oilcloth, that was cracked in the corners and was always sticky with jam and egg yolk. The blue flowered wallpaper had turned brownish and greasy with age and under the window by the table there was a brown stain from the rain that leaked in under the badly fitting window sill.[1]

This is beautiful and forceful writing, and it demonstrates well the method of the realist writer, a method which focusses on details, usually details from daily life, and builds by artful accumulation a grid of impressions which leads readers step by step into what we are asked to take as an immediate, intimate, and sensual relation with a specific activity or event, so that with a "shock of recognition" we think, yes this is what this specific experience must feel like. Its contours have been rendered in language correlatives that carry the conviction of actuality. The activity itself can vary immensely, though favourite

clusters have tended to be domestic occupations (Mrs. Bentley's house painting) and outdoor labour (Tess's turnip picking).

In *Country of the Heart* Butala has created a number of these scenes depicting rural life, several of which are memorable for their moving insight into ordinary life. One of these describes the de-horning of steers on a ranch:

> As soon as the steer was held by the neck in the headgate, Luke caught the nose pliers in the steer's nostrils. Then he pulled on the rope that went through the handle of the pliers . . .
>
> Then Howard took over. He was the biggest and claimed to be the strongest of the three. The de-horners were shaped like giant pliers but had razor-sharp cutting edges . . . As soon as Luke had the animal's head still, Howard fastened the de-horners around the horn, down deep, taking a little hair and flesh too. He jammed the handles together, taking the horn off in one easy motion, part slice and part gouge, while the steer bellowed and roared and then a new note, a high-pitched squeal of pure anguish, pierced the heart of anybody listening. The steer staggered, its eyes rolled back in its head, but before it could recover, someone else . . . set a heated branding iron where the horn had been, where blood now shot in a ten-foot fountain from each side of its head. Smoke rose from the branding iron, the smell of burning flesh and fresh blood hung in the air.[2]

This is powerful writing. In it the beauties of slice-of-life realism are evident: the way focussed concentration on an accumulation of details from a specific set of activities gives the experience a presence and an immediacy that make the characters and situation come alive and grant to the writing the ring of authenticity. Here it is the particulars related to the size, construction, and function of the de-horning pliers combined with the exactly rendered reactions of the steer (visual, tactile, olfactory, aural) to the operation performed on it by the pliers that make this scene gripping, horrifying even, and forge the event in the imagination. This is what slice-of-life realism does well; it recreates the plasma of existence so successfully that we feel the writer's life-blood running through our own veins. Much fine writing in the Saskatchewan novel rings true in just this way.

Another example occurs in Terrence Heath's *The Last Hiding Place*, where the protagonist, Gabe, ponders his existence as a farmer:

> Gabe felt suddenly irritable, annoyed at having to change the cultivator feet, at the cold wind, at the faded red paint on the tractor and the cracks in the back tires. He threw the spike feet onto the ground next to the cultivator and glared at the tractor

> and implement. He'd bought them new with a DVA loan in 1952, when the government was helping returned soldiers to get settled. The war, the rodeo, the travelling from town to town, restaurant food and hotel rooms; moving had been his way of live. Then, suddenly, he had wanted something different. Driving a new tractor on his own land seemed the fulfillment of all he'd ever wanted. And here was the tractor wearing out; the cultivator he'd bought to go with the tractor wearing out; he was wearing out.
>
> * * *
>
> Gabe took a large crescent wrench from the toolbox under the gas tank on the tractor. He hefted it in his hand; it weighed top-heavy like a club. In the movie on TV last weekend, a couple of hoods had smashed up a new car with short clubs made out of pieces of pipe. For a moment, he wanted to smash the tractor, break off lights, bang in the radiator and gauges.[3]

This passage is less graphic than the passage from *Country of the Heart* cited above, more diffused with speculation and apt to slip into metaphysics, but it is rendered primarily in the realist mode. Naturalistic in style, it paints a verbal picture, evoking people and places with accuracy and sympathy. As a narrative mode it invites readers into a world which, because it has the fit of people's daily lives, perhaps our own included, feels comfortable. It also provides us with a rich sense of character, situation, locale. As in realist paintings, it uses detail, proportion, perspective, and other balancing techniques to create texture, a representational correlation between life and art.

The other positive aspect of the realistic novel is that unlike the romance—which presents idealized life, the simple conflict of Good and Evil, and the over-simplification of ethical issues—it leads us to important psychological insights: in presenting life's daily complications and confusions it shows characters to be neither wholly good nor bad, neither black nor white; that is, it treats them as human beings. In this connection we should note the work of Edna Alford, whose *Sleep Full of Dreams*, more novel than short stories in its scope, combines social and psychological dimensions of realism in a touching and harrowing depiction of old age. Byrna Barclay's relentless narratives also remind us of the highly moralistic aspect of realism. The novel written in this form, then, not only paints a picture of human activity, it also makes its readers aware of men's and women's consciousnesses.

There is something else, though. Fictions written in the realistic mode, because they deal with the quotidian, with the minutiae of daily life, with physical

labour, home and work place routines, the daily cycle of getting and spending (of, for example, wresting a living from a resistant landscape)—by their very nature, such fictions produce bleak prospects: in the realistic novel someone is almost invariably trying to eke a living out of barren soil, or make a relationship flourish in desolation and isolation—or both.

Mrs. Bentley of Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* is paradigmatic: suppressed by the protestant niggardliness of the prairie small town, oppressed by her suffocating husband, repressed by her own fears of inadequacy as lover, mother, and individual, she engages throughout *As For Me and My House* in a desperate and futile struggle to bring joy and celebration to her life. She might have said along with Margaret Laurence's Hagar, "I must always have wanted that—simply to rejoice."[4] The heroines of more recent prairie novels, and indeed collections of linked stories written in the realistic mode, have endured similar fates. Something endemic to the realistic novel, then, propels it to futility and despair, to expressions of fatalism and defeat. There is a kind of "dead end" psychology that accompanies the realistic novel's fascination with an array of closely evoked minor details from ordinary lives lived in straitened and repressive circumstances. Something of this comes through in Donald Stephens's comment on Sinclair Ross: "There is everywhere an almost unreasonable acquiescence in the inevitable, but what the inevitable is no one can foresee with any accuracy."[5] I like, too, Martha Ostenso's observation in *Wild Geese* that "The austerity in nature reduces the outward expression in life . . . because there is not such an abundance of natural objects for the spirit to react to."[6]

In a paradoxical way, the realistic mode encourages a brand of sentimentalism, one in which exaggerated emotions derive not from excessive grief or joy (the sort of thing that defines the works of Charles Dickens), but from indulgence in despair. The prairie novel has done a remarkable job of forcing us to look in the mirror: often it strikingly records the discrepancy between an ideally imagined world and the actual world inhabited by its protagonists. It has been at times relentless in documenting lives of quiet desperation. But where in another culture the novel would propose in discourse or metaphor something practical to do about the reflection there, too often the prairie novel wallows in that discrepancy, seemingly more happy at being unhappy than in doing anything about it.

It might be useful to recall here Aristotle's dictum in the *Poetics* that poetry is valuable because it shows us people not simply as they are, but as they ought

to be—as, perhaps we might say with slice-of-life realism in mind, they are capable of becoming.

In some ways the development of the prairie novel seems in retrospect predictable, given the historical circumstances of prairie life until the last few decades—living defined as "peasant," the eking out of minimal existence from a harsh and untamed landscape. But the choice of narrative mode, arising from the models available to prairie writers until quite recently, also in a sense precluded adjustments in tone, atmosphere, mood, and indeed message: what often emerged was a sort of joyless indulgence in lives lived on the margins of comfort, pleasure, and beauty. At times, too, it encouraged a kind of reverse snobbism in prairie writing, a competition almost to demonstrate who has suffered more at the hands of hostile nature, callous families, loaded politics, and more recently, male-dominated social institutions. At its worst it is a sort of narrative strip-tease showing who is most nakedly and personally in touch with the "real world."

The point is that narrative mode, not surprisingly, precludes certain insights in fiction as it privileges others. A corollary is that alongside novels written in the mode of slice-of-life realism there have recently emerged other kinds of fictions in other narrative modes, less referential, more imaginative; and these, like slice-of life realism, achieve their own beauties, achieve certain definable effects and perceptions unavailable to more traditional referential modes.

Here is one of the more striking scenes from Geoffrey Ursell's *Perdue: Or How The West Was Lost*, a scene which because it describes a buffalo hunt is a useful foil for the earlier steer de-horning scene:

> The next morning, before the buffalo began to come down from the hills, Sir strung the men out in a ragged line. As the buffalo came plodding towards them, towards the grass behind the men, the men began to shoot.
>
> They shot all morning, all afternoon . . . They shot and they shot, a thin line of men creating a growing mound of animal corpses.
>
> The buffalo, desperate to reach the succulent grass, kept plodding straight ahead, climbing over bodies before them, hooves sinking into warm flesh. They stumbled on, struggling up and over the pile. As they reached the top, the men shot them and they slumped down. The sun floated across the sky, dying in a dark-red glare.

* * *

> The third day they moved to the eastern hills. The blood of the beasts had been flowing along the lines of bodies and down towards the river, swelling the slow trickle of water to a thick, red stream. Now, to reach the river, the blood had to flow past the men. The bodies had created a dam, and the blood gathered at the foot of the mound of bodies and began to move towards the men in a thick, slow wave.
>
> By afternoon the entire plain was covered with blood, a lake of blood that lapped at the foundations of the house and barn and woodpile, circled them, flowed ponderously toward the river.[7]

This too is wonderful writing, forceful, and evocative in the manner of the inventive and fantastic South Americans. The method of this mode of writing, magic realist, is to take details from the plasma of life, as the realist does, but to use them in a different manner: to select fewer specifics and to enhance them, to exaggerate, to foreground them in such a way that they seem to tear free from their backgrounds. In a magic realist painting, objects appear without connection to background, without intermediating shadow. A parallel effect is achieved in magic realist writing. In this scene it is blood which is given such treatment, so that by the conclusion of the episode it has achieved an iconic status, unpleasant to be sure, but truthful to the circumstances of western settlement without being, so to speak, accurate. The impression created by magic realism is thus freedom from the lowest common denominator aspect of realism, is relief from the pull of the quotidian on the imagination, is a kind of magical mixing of what is with what could be (what Freud might have called releasing the reality principle to the pleasure principle).

Numerous effects of similar kinds have been achieved by Saskatchewan writers otherwise strikingly dissimilar: in addition to Ursell, there are Guy Vanderhaeghe, David Carpenter, and David Williams. Vanderhaeghe and Carpenter might usefully be called inheritors of the novel of manners and morals, while Williams continues the apocalyptic tradition. Each writes with purposes in mind other than painting a verbal picture of what is, using language in effect as a tool of perception, with the object of not so much imitating reality as unmasking it. In short, they have in common vision—here meaning the desire to unveil the assumptions of ordinary reality. Such writing by its very manner defies acceptance, acquiescence, resignation. One of David Williams's characters concludes his fictional odyssey with this insight: "*I am that I am.*" And shortly thereafter:

I AM THAT I AM
AM I worse than Moses?
I AM

. . .

I AM would be at peace with Himself
His brother could never stand for Him
I AM has to die for Himself.[8]

This is both unconventional and irreverent writing, perhaps even shocking. Like much that is unusual, its boldness unsettles us at first. But its elliptical method, its frontal verbal coarseness, its mixing of the sacred and the profane are also powerful agents of perception, less accessible to readers accustomed to realism than are other modes, admittedly, but worth the care and patience required in the reading.

Guy Vanderhaeghe is something else. His wryly humourous style, combined with gentle and acute insight into modern manners and mores, places him strongly in the tradition of sophisticates such as Jane Austen, Anthony Powell, and more recently, John Fowles. They too select details from daily life as the centre of their fictions, but their method is to focus on specifics of behaviour, of manners, and to use them as a window onto contemporary values. Vanderhaeghe's slant, finally, is psychological, and this is what principally distinguishes him from his more sociologically oriented contemporaries.

In the novel of manners, in magic realism, and in apocalyptic fiction, taken as a group, then, we find a fundamentally different impulse than in slice-of-life realism. But both, as we have seen, make fine writing, and if I seem to privilege one over the other it is perhaps more as an antidote to the prevailing enthusiasms of reviewers and critics rather than any messianic zeal on my part.[9] Perhaps the farthest I would be willing to go in that regard, and then only with Auden in mind ("poetry makes nothing happen") is to assert that the novel can reveal how and why lives are lived in ordinary helplessness, and even perhaps posit ways out of our dilemmas.

The Saskatchewan novel is not only live and well, it continues to be, as it has been in the past, a vital means in taking stock of prairie society. More objective than other forms, it continues to be a critical took in the apprehension of outer reality, an agent, however clumsy, of our continuing assessment of social

processes and man's complex, unending struggle with himself, with nature, with his institutions.

NOTES

1. Sharon Butala, *Country of the Heart* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1984), 5.
2. Ibid., 77-78.
3. Terrence Heath, *The Last Hiding Place* (Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1982), 17-18.
4. Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), 292.
5. Donald Stephens, "Wind, Sun and Dust," in *Writers of the Prairies*, ed. Donald G. Stephens (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973), 177.
6. Martha Ostenso, *Wild Geese*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), 78.
7. Geoffrey Ursell, *Perdue: Or How the West Was Lost* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1984), 8-10.
8. David Williams, *The River Horsemen* (Toronto: Anansi, 1981), 214-15.
9. One interesting observation about the two modes is that women seem to have been drawn more to one, the realistic, particularly in the short story form, while men seem to have been drawn to the visionary. Exceptions immediately come to mind within the larger context of prairie writing, however, Aritha Van Herk (of Alberta) exemplifying women who write in the visionary mode, and Jake MacDonald (of Manitoba) exemplifying men whose narratives are principally realistic.

Invented History: False Document, or Waiting for Saskatchewan

ARITHA VAN HERK

There are hundreds of Canadian writers waiting/writing/wanting to elope with Saskatchewan. The reasons for this secret fascination with an invented space delineated only by surveyors' lines are not all pure. Some claim Saskatchewan is very rich and if you can just talk her into running off with you, you'll have it made. Some say she has a wonderful facility with the more corporeal aspects of existence and can show you things that those libertine poets in Toronto never even dreamed of. Some say her intellect's the thing: she's so smart she'll blow all the cobwebs out of your ears. And others claim she is a priestess of time, a spirit who can lead her companions back into the realms of the dead, back back to the labyrinths of prairie wisdom. All of which are tempting, in their own way.

But Saskatchewan hangs around the shadows of Canadian literature like a secret and seductive woman who refuses to reveal her face. She is wearing a *yashmak* with odd triangular openings that shift and fluctuate to reveal occasionally the corner of her chin, one eyebrow, or an earlobe, but never the whole face. She dresses in a variety of wonderful costumes: sometimes wheat sacking, sometimes a cerulean blue drifted with mare's tales, sometimes a tacky, unabashed technicolour sunset, and then, as if repenting her teasing, a drift-white robe. Her voice, when she actually talks, is huskily pleasant, without American twang or eastern slur, and she speaks most often in metaphor.

She is rumoured to have had endless liaisons with poets, quite a few truncated affairs with short story writers, and is now prepared to take on novelists. The rumours say she has gone through several already and has several more in training, but her waiting, her impatience, suggest that she is looking for a change, looking to alter the invented history she has lain with so far. Still, despite all rumours, she remains alluring, with a beguiling irresistibility that prompts her repeated appearance in the false documents of literature.

She insists that all her suitors have historical and physiological knowledge of the body, she insists that they be far-as-the-eye-can-see runners, that they recog-

nize soil composition, not to mention the potential of seed grain. She also requires practical experience. They must have studied at Fort Qu'Appelle, lain down in the Willow Bunch giant's bed to measure it for size, camped overnight in the trenches at Batoche. They must be capable of dining elegantly in the Bessborough, and of finding their way through the Porcupine Hills. If they cannot pronounce Bengough, they are immediately disqualified. She disdains those who make running forays into the bush and then return to the comforts of cities. Her favourite smell is of sweat and sun and sex on camping trips.

Keeping someone like this satisfied is a task. After all, there are some illustrious characters in her past, she has a reputation to maintain, somebody better invent a good one quick. For all the documents that chronicle her life so far are not exactly false, but fragmented parts of her invented history, and the curse on those who would elope with Saskatchewan is her insatiable ability to command incompletion, her insatiable ability to wait. She has already waited long, and just in case you have not heard her history, I'll try to reinvent it for you.

She would never tell this story, but it all started with Sinclair Ross. For him, she agreed to purse her lips and put on a dollar forty-five hat. That performance gave rise to a small but shapely novel surrounded by dust storms and drought, all the now-clichés of depression, a novel hunched in isolation, but invented into a classic, incomparably classic. Radiating tenacity into Canadian literature, Mrs. Bentley's contradictory and only semi-confessional voice persists as the voice of Saskatchewan. Who has her doubts. She suspects herself capable of being like Mrs. Bentley once, but she is sick of being permanently cast into the role, and she thinks Ross has a lot to answer for, only his ambiguity getting him off the hook so long. Still, she is fond of that old man's novel, full of lies and double truths; false document, the way it makes everyone in Canadian literature argue and light up, the way that they take sides. She is not too fond of Philip, but then, there's been a few too many preachers sniffing her way and she's had them out.

She refuses to talk about Ed McCourt. It is hard to imagine why, whether she just does not like his stories or whether she has changed so much that she does not like being reminded. She knows him all right, she flares her nostrils a little wher his name is mentioned, but she says not a word. It might have something to do with the Canadian West in fiction and the way she is portrayed in that sweeping history. She has never liked criticism or generalizations about the prairie; she is special and she knows it and maybe McCourt slighted her. She is, after all, Saskatchewan.

But Mitchell, now there was a passion. Used her name in the first sentence—Saskatchewan prairie, with just the right breath of reverence. And his book is full of her names, full of bison and Riel and Qu'Appelle and Blackfoot and Fort, full of prairie and caragana, thistle and dust and Presbyterian, meadowlarks and grasshoppers, foxtail and gophers. He invented names for her all right, full of sweet supplications and distant calls. That was a sentimental attachment, as early attachments will be, but she liked the way the wind blew through the novel, liked it despite its sentimentality. In that novel she was the wind, and she has no wish to undo that history.

Which was followed, so far as records tell and as passion often will, by a long and platonic connection, Saskatchewan as de-figuration for Mennonites and Indians, only a place where the huge scoop of history turns itself over. With Wiebe she circled the edges of sloughs and skirted the northern bush, always looking for something, digging, searching. His abstract discoveries were too philosophical, and she tried to filter them with jackpine and saskatoon bushes, but he was hard to deflect from his visions. What intrigued her was that he did not talk about her—the she she was— at all, but Saskatchewan's place before naming, before straight lines and surveyors' chains and railway tracks, the thin stretch of limitation settled on infinity and altered into the death of temptation, the end of the buffalo and the bellowing scream of the future. Which is Saskatchewan today, she knows herself, the inexorable phalanx of graveyards, reserves, sections of land, all measured, measured, measured. Wiebe was always measuring and then some, Big Bear and Riel and Wandering Spirit and Gabriel Dumont measured as carefully into language as the measurements that defeated them, and then ultimately proved them triumphant. He recorded and imagined unrecorded Saskatchewan in tumultuous language, preached her into being. Preached her into being herself, Saskatchewan. He was intriguing all right, but there was too much spirit there, and not enough flesh.

And David Williams too, she went back and forth between the two, river horsemen and burning wood preaching her into being in a Faulknerian litany stretched so far north, Saskatchewan from Yoknapatawpha, married the two in a sibilance beyond her language of ponderous rhythms and powerful urges. All that mythology, she was terrified of it, had a horror of her own intense history crowding in on her, catching up with her, formed into a huge shout of the past, all of Canada's past here, not crouched somewhere else behind Victorian houses and proper schools, but here on the stretch of prairie grass and poplar bluffs, the blood under the country's skin beating beating beating.

Those two were so intense, so penetrating, she was downright relieved to run off with Vanderhaeghe, downright relieved to fight with him about adolescence and fat and snow and frustration. My present age, she kept whispering to him, is beyond measure; I am growing both older and younger every day. Why are you so anxious about temporal space, about growing old? I am older than any story will ever be, my life too a withdrawal and a refusal and a knowing, oh too much knowing of too much. But he could not decide between novels or stories and while he was pondering his documents she slid out a side door, she jumped in her car, she left the motel.

Found herself in a boat with a fictioneer come novella writer fishing for glory, fishing for Luce, fishing for jewels, fishing. Carpenter, she thought he would build her something, and instead she fished with him, learned how to throw a line and tie a hook, a fly, actually catch the slippery fish of words below the lines. She was getting experience, Saskatchewan, getting ready to make more appearances in the language world. Inventing herself. And she had never been fishing before, thought that was the old lady's job.

And she needed to get ready, she goddamn well needed preparation, as if philosophers and preachers and fishermen were not enough, as if down-dealing unhappy and never growed up boys were not enough, she had to get herself ready for the future, for being lost instead of won, exaggerated out of shape and into a giant, perdue, everything wrapped up in one book, so frenetic and frantic that she was reeling, not sure if she could take this hellish paradise, not sure that things were supposed to turn out this way Ursell, where the hell can we go from here? Although she loved the smell, would have stayed in that novel just for the smell.

And then again a prophet renouncing himself for dustship glory, Saskatchewan fascinated despite all the dust, despite the law, despite the grief, Schroeder's Sukanen seduced by Saskatchewan into flinging himself into her deep dust, the tide rising rising into prophetic madness and sanity. Saskatchewan had to move on, beyond prophets.

She is waiting now, for another novelist. If you ask, she says she has had enough of these dabblers, she wants to be the ultimate subject of the document. She waits for another novel to inhabit, another novel to invent her a past and a future. And she hesitates over the next one—which writer can she invent, take into herself completely?

But there are other speculations that Saskatchewan is not a woman at all but a man, a man in a grey fedora with baggy trousers and a skiff of dust over bulgy

shoes. He drives a combine, a big Massey, and when he climbs down from his hazy aerie, the sun-blasted cab, people applaud, and he doffs his baseball cap, with the words Elephant Fertilizer on the crest, and his green coveralls bell slightly in the prairie wind. He sometimes shows up at rodeos in jeans and a stetson (not the white Calgary kind, but a real working hat) and rides, rides, rides. Then, he takes a turn as the rodeo clown, comes back as a businessman or a politician, a professor in his spare time, all those wonderful faces under his hat, agleam with the novels he is seducing. He is a snazzy dresser and a snazzy dancer; he knows what these women writers want, a little blood and thunder, a little dirt under the fingernails. He loves a good beer parlour and good fight. But underneath his stubble, he can be as soft as butter. Learned that a long time ago. And yes, he has had a lot more to do with poets and short story writers too—he grows them like wild oats, but once in a while he takes time out to linger with a novelist, once in a while.

He has experience all right, he is the consummate inventor, him and his night winds, his inviting grass. He has inventions to offer beyond history and document, he has all the sighs and tears and cries of pleasure. He expects his women to do anything a man can do and more; maybe it is a tall order, but so far they have lived up to it, even sometimes outdone his expectations. So he keeps hanging around, asking for more. He alters every document that he can enter, he takes a perverse delight in the history of the future.

Although he can be amiable enough about real history. He drank enough tea and spent enough hours listening to Old Woman's story, the long journey of exile and starvation, medicine woman's summer of the hungry pup unravelling, unravelling, in Barclay's slow, stretching tale, a different version of his story of the past, the old woman's vision. He sat up at night, he even carried messages, ran errands to hear that one, did not care if he was not the main character.

He is a good listener, he has entertained other histories, the history of marriage, promises, promises, he spent a long time with that one too, Saskatchewan, although he laughed at Eleanor's ignorance of what she knew: "what do I know, poor dumb hick from Fairmont, Saskatchewan?" He knows what he knows and she knows it too, marriage in Saskatchewan the same as everywhere else, and what can she expect if she marries Hugh Smith of Smith and Smith, Phillips and Pfefferle, Chartered Accountants, instead of Saskatchewan. They shouldn't make you promise anything, but they do and it is an old story and even older when it is twenty-nine below and hard to break out of the house. He laughed with Simmie all the way through—it was terrible, that marriage, but

hilarious. He made her no promises and told her no lies, just stayed quietly waiting for her to leave, sotto voce, the remarks between the lines.

And he invented the soft sibilance of Brewster's sisters, their whispered movements from chair to chair, family intricacies. He entered families, gave birth to them, he knows the relatives and gossip and ritual, coffee drinking and visiting and tying up the loose ends. Saskatchewan harbours sisters and husbands, grandmothers and aunts, he knows how to sit around a kitchen table, himself relative to all, a kindly older brother, the one who brings home treats, a brick of ice-cream, a new baseball bat, who is calm, who contributes small details to the family lies of births and deaths and small beginnings and losses.

Even so far as Sapergia's immigrants, entered outside of the wider family, bringing Romania with them. He loved their dark laughter and fierce pleasure, he gobbled it greedily, those foreigners, their pride. With Sapergia, Saskatchewan turned himself into a foreigner too; he dressed in sheepskin, learned how to shear, even to dance properly, by firelight. And shyly, having to get rid of all his Englishness, his precedence, Saskatchewan crept into their Romanian world and made himself welcome Altered the document, slipped in.

Slipped into Haley's nest of singing birds too, all those academics in a small western city and a provincial university, Saskatchewan had to learn academese and that wasn't easy, had to learn how to talk like them, whew, as astringent as David Lodge, whoever the hell he is. Quite taken in by that little conspiracy of sessionals and professors and mail rooms and scholarly publications or lack thereof and crap venues. He developed quite an ability to handle that world, even began to invent himself as a bioscientific researcher in Saskatoon, counting in one of the gopher barns. But Anna took up with someone else.

For Butala he became a cowboy, a rancher squinting into the wind, riding, riding, the invitation of loneliness behind the gates of the sun and eternal suggestion. There he was limitless, from childhood to old age buried in the country of the heart, without respite or alleviation, demanding and taking, and being forced to give, the horses and the prairie. He never expected he would be set to so much riding, so many horses and roundups, and he was tired when that invention was over, Saskatchewan. But satisfied, lived up to his own fiction.

Remember his reputation. Even my character could not resist him, could not stand the seduction, had to sneak over the border from Alberta in order to feel she had been in a novel, had to visit Saskatchewan to say she had been there, part of her amorous journey.

Still, male or female, Saskatchewan is always ready for the next one, waits

for more novels. Saskatchewan's novel refuses to be characterized or completed, refuses definition. Searching reveals no common denominator, except maybe for a plethora of prophets, except maybe for a fierce light that is not the invisible border but the prairie. Saskatchewan ranges between covers as freely as the writers it takes up with, and if there is one characteristic beyond definition, it has not been invented yet. It is always more than landscape, multiplicity of voice, shade of smell or touch. Saskatchewan takes sensory precedence and shapes those novels with its sounding, its spoken and unspoken name. *I am here in your books: you cannot erase me. Lie, invent me, falsify me. Wait for me.*

With a special nod in the direction of that waiting, the ultimate false document, the ultimate invented history. From a character stretched one side of the world to another. Saskatchewan appears as father in Wah's title, book beyond novel, beyond short story, beyond poetry. *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, finally named, finally metaphored more than place, blood and bone, utaniki, haibun, haiku, diary, prose, poetry, novel, Saskatchewan beyond genre and gender, both she and he entranced, wanting to stay in this one, and they are —named wholly and complete as family, relation, language, breath, Saskatchewan—an axe, a deep oar, a river, a stone, father, we are waiting for you, Saskatchewan, all the writers who write here, Suknaski, Crozier, Szumigalski, Story, Scriver, Sorestad, Simmie, Sapergia, Saskatchewan is breathin' your name with a sigh.

Yearbooks and Roadmaps: A Dialogue of Voice and Vision

DAVID WILLIAMS

The High School Yearbook is the earliest model of invented history, our original false document. It is sly and knowing but not too revealing, already more interested in future possibilities. Even as it catches the little lambs horsing around, it records a passing mood, assumes a necessary social profile. Preachers and cowboys, fishermen and prophets. How the hell did we grow so many prophets? Thank God we had no subway walls for them to write on too! Just the faces grinning out of their frames, all so familiar they breed. And the siren song of youth, waiting for Saskatchewan.

Meanwhile, Saskatchewan herself is out looking for Mr. Goodbar. She knows what she wants, what her dignity can command. Never again with Slam Bam Vander Zalm. Now it's only desire in language she wants to take into herself. Completely. When she's not a transvestite parading around in chaps and spurs or even sheeps-clothing. Either way, she seeks release from the reality principle into the pleasure principle. The Yearbook does a lot by refusing definition.

Voice and vision, on the other hand, starts out with definitions. Useful ones, perhaps, to locate directions in the Saskatchewan novel. But terms, like surveyors' lines, can take infrequent notice of the landscape. Realism and post-modernism make up the same unyielding grid they do in David Arnason's survey of contemporary Saskatchewan fiction.[1] Voice may be truer to the reality principle itself, the expression of plain folks, but it tends to sigh a lot out on the alkali flats while vision looks down from the lantern-lookout of that barn across from the Legislative Building. Voice is unfortunately rural, pessimistic, and helpless in the face of natural realities. Vision, on the other hand, has run off to the city; playful and purposive in its reshaping of mundane existence, it submits to nothing but pleasure.

But try these terms out on *As For Me and My House* and you get Mrs. Bentley's voice hopelessly at odds with Philip's artistic vision.[2] The voice of despair proves unreliable because it will not see the shaping imagination at work, looking into the void to give it life and form. The style of Mrs. Bentley's

narrative is not the same thing as the author's structure. We as readers preclude certain insights by failing at times to hear the ironies of voice.

The postmodernist is not above privileging certain insights either. Consider one of our most inventive novels, *The Invention of the World*, which takes a demon out of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and turns him into a Rumpelstiltskin. The power of darkness, that other great pole of existence, is denied by a hope that some Ideal world looms behind this one. The pilot who flies the pilgrims back to Vancouver Island has just been chatting with Ralph Waldo Emerson: "When I walk on the streets or drive on the pavement I see only the lines and things that people have tried to put there, but when I get up here, in my plane, I see the real island. It is there, still, all the time growing up through."[3] The transcendentalist might well have supplied an epigraph to the novel: "Build therefore your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions."[4] But this is a world-view based on the sophism that evil is only an absence of good, as cold is the absence of heat. I still prefer Melville: "Tell this to a man rounding Cape Horn in a gale." If realism stutters, having no answer to death and decay, postmodernism is blinded by its own illusion of freedom.

Vision might turn out to be just another tone of voice, a preferred attitude to existence. But voice is not reducible to tone, and cannot be described by a few touchstones of style. It is heard in the form and strategy of narration itself, as vision is seen in structure.

The structure of Sharon Butala's novels makes of realism a very doubtful signpost to her territory, though the people of *Country of the Heart*, for example, do come to realistic assessments of their lives. Lannie learns to be responsible for her own life by giving up a deterministic view of the past, though a social worker lightens her load by finding a physical cause for her emotional disorder. Iris accepts the gulf of experience which separates her from the child she would like to be her own. Her common sense also lessens her attraction to an aging lover, though here the novel veers toward romance as Iris asks herself, "Who would ever love her again as if she were the most precious woman in the universe?"[5] James, the aging figure of need and desire, is made to carry too great a burden for his characterization, standing at last for soul or the wisdom of the heart, a dreamed character who is part myth and part Harlequin. The narrative strategy of the first half of the novel also suggests that reality is too much for most of the characters. Lannie in the city imagines life at home; Lannie at home recalls the cellar pub in the student pub. In the truck outside Chinook's

café, Iris watches Barney through the window and rehearses the history of their marriage. Barney in the implement shed summons up memories of courtship in a symbolic scene of de-horning. What operates as a mechanical flashback device turns into a psychological strategy of each character to control experience by getting some distance on it. Each is a would-be artist, and after the melodrama of the attempted suicide, that is what each becomes: the artist of herself. The tension between realism and high and low romance in this first novel is working its way, I think, toward a more self-conscious awareness of the role of art in achieving the Jungian individuation which underlies Iris's dream of the magical baby and the rainbow.[6]

The man who loved women comes to life in *The Gates of The Sun*, offering a more authentic version of a world beyond realism: "When he entered her, he entered another world, and he could never remember her body after, only that dark and resonating world they went into together."[7] Civilization and its discontents are left behind in this unrepressed first half of the novel. The wild prairie is woman and white-rumped antelope are men, and the set-piece conventions of Western romance glitter brightly within the settings of social history: the 1918 'flu; twenties rum-running; thirties drought and the stalled trek on Ottawa. But the second half of the novel veers toward realism in its chronicle of marriage, children, and work. The knell of "What's it all for?" sounds loudly here: people farm for survival but they destroy the old free spirit of the West and bruise the very body of love. The gulf between realism and romance is closed only in the work of a walk-on painter who renews Andrew's lost world in his art. The paintings are more than consolations of form since they reconcile for him the changing external world with the internal world he has dreamed since childhood. Andrew dies back into the dream; he lives on in the light flooding the picture. Art, not passion, is beginning to figure in Sharon Butala's vision as the larger embodiment of soul.

David Carpenter's *Jewels* describes a similar passage from loneliness to passion to art. At one point, Julian Fairchild who is dreaming kingfisher dreams is asked by a painter to step right into his picture:

> Julian walked into the flowing floating light, straight into the white spot.
>
> "Remember, my little one" [the painter says in French], "if you celebrate love without obsession, all will become Life and Art."[8]

Julian, another prairie exile like Julius Champney of *The Invention of the World*,

is drawn in by his own tough-talking Maggie Kyle who plans an orphanage for tired folk. In this socialist whodunit, the hero learns to love his neighbour by shading over the moral line, but Dave isn't ready to leave him rooting in shit with the Animal Co-op. Julian is permitted to die into another world instead of going to live with his own Irma la Muskrat. Life and art are united in death, that ultimate expression of other worlds.

Geoffrey Ursell parodies the old literary methods in *Two Hundred Years of Solitude [Perdue]* but he too longs for another world, proves himself the perfect companion of Sharon Butala's vision. Sir John A., father of confederation and a score of crooked land syndicates, looks wonderfully incongruous in the bifocal lens of Perdue's binoculars. The Earl of Cannington Manor doesn't even see he's out of place, shooting CPR trains with an elephant gun, since India and Canada are all the same anyway under a tablecloth graced by Wellington at Waterloo. Oh, there'll always be An England in these bloody foreign lands, what? Tall tale, you say? History gone to find a hossy-gossy? Bloody hell. Bloody foreigners. F.P. Grove another of those bloody clappers? Damn silly giant anyway, striding out of the sunset to stook a whole township, build up Government House. Still, he's put in his place by that bloody ragger, Robert Kroetsch, eh? Lifted right up by a tornado out of *Badlands* and pile-driven down in the ground. Then covered by that bloody stone, old Big Bear, eternal rock under foot. What? Fingerbones are Chief's Son's Hand? Well burn my arse in a barn if they don't choke His Highness Most Serene himself, and what will happen to our British Empire? Serves the blighter right for running off with Mel Brooks's Gal Sal.

Parody laughs imperial history out of countenance, though His Highness Most Serene insists one last time that colonials are to blame for their colonization: "You are guilty," he shrieks Through the Looking Glass, "Guilty!"[9] But Perdue and his Indian maiden are saved from themselves and the Presbyterian Church by the sacrifice of another Giant Son in whom the bloody Father is well pleased.[10] The novel, moving from he to she to they in point-of-view, ends in yet another recovery of lost prairie, suffused by the odour of sex. Gal Sal rides the Giant to horse, Tommy Douglas leads us to the fucking promised land, and the holy family are caught up into light, up to the sky of the Cree "night dancers."[11] Here their tears are wiped forever from their eyes, along with all the bloody potash. And the postmodernist, who set off down his own grid road, arrives at last at the gates of the sun.

What I seem to be saying is that they're all the same with a bag over their

heads. Realism, modernism, postmodernism, the narrative mode doesn't change the vision. Butala and Ursell are especially mistrustful of the machine in the garden and long to go behind the time of the fathers, back to pre-history, to the romance of untamed West.

Byrna Barclay's *Summer of the Hungry Pup*, chronologically the first of these novels ending in a dance of light, is even more careful of The Way Back, its storytelling defining itself as "the elder's way of teaching the young."[12] The novel's compelling interest grows out of its double autobiographical form, the medicine woman recounting her life and the bereaved granddaughter giving up an immigrant dream of Sweden as home. There is a particular danger in the double-memoir form since the narrator is really a pupil. Old Woman is the voice of local history moving right in with the writer; the struggle is greater to find aesthetic detachment or distance. But Barclay's quest to reconcile the Swedish Grandmother with the 'Other-Grandmother' allows for some intriguing complications of voice: "I expected them to join hands and offer that unity to me. But they seemed to be waiting for me to come to them. I wanted to go to them, speak with them in whatever language—English, Swedish or Cree—that would bring us together, but I didn't have any words."[13] The novel becomes the search for such words, Old Woman relating her odyssey in the new ways after the Outbreak, Annika telling of how she learned to let Johanna of Hannas go into the unity of all things. Though perhaps the success of these two women is also their greatest challenge: they give in to the temptation to speak with the same voice, Thunderbird in Thor's language, unity achieved in monologue. Annika ends speaking not her own authentic tongue but a Cree-English deficient in articles: "I would know a rounding out of all things on prairie and cross over into the fullest understanding of the unity of earth and sky that Old Woman had always known and Johanna learned."[14] The imitation of Old Woman is complete. By contrast, *The Temptations of Big Bear* depends on the lingering tension of its multiple voices, the failure of history to translate opposing world views.[15]

Big Bear reminds us that the novel as a genre is inherently polyglot. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that it was born out of "a primordial struggle between tribes, peoples, cultures and languages."[16] The struggle was carried on in various forms of mimicry and parody. Universally, "the most ancient forms for representing language were organized by laughter—these were originally nothing more than the ridiculing of another's language and another's direct discourse."[17] But as the novel form developed, it outgrew its tribal chauvinism, its mockery of other dialects and customs, and began to incorporate them. The

novel became *par excellence* "a living mix of varied and opposing voices" which criticized and renewed itself through its own dialogical relationships.[18] The novel is fundamentally unlike the lyric and the drama because it does not speak directly; rather, it presents an image of other people's language. Ultimately, "the language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other."[19] Our most ambitious novels capture such a system not only of ethnic dialects but of competing ideologies, where prairie life speaks in all its voices about the beliefs and unbelief of our brief period of history.

The talk show of The Beast in Guy Vanderhaeghe's *My Present Age* looks like a deserving target of social satire; but it is also the organizing metaphor for a whole range of conflicting languages in the novel, whether of the genus *socio-pretentious* or *literary-escapist*. Ed the cynic is a ribald judge of "the tyranny of common taste,"[20] ranging from the clichés of the human potential movement to the self-serving pap which passes on radio for social activism: "I think it's clear to my listeners what I stand for, what I've always stood for. What you might stand for nobody knows. So I'm appealing to you, Dear Aggrieved, to join the majority. Try to do something positive like the rest of us poor slobs . . . Help make this a better world. Don't retribute, *contribute*! Yours respectfully, Tom Rollins."[21] The aggrieved Ed has a keen ear for absurdity in other forms of popular expression, such as his father's apologia for parenthood: "Momentarily he saw himself in the role of patriarch, Ben Cartwright perhaps, explaining to a quizzical Hoss the larger meaning of the Ponderosa."[22] But Ed likewise lives out his own literary imitations, speaking the language of Victorian novels to a vulgar modern lawyer:

> "And you believe that I, Ed, am the author of your misfortunes?"
>
> I often talk like this to Benny. That is, I adopt a declamatory style with a whiff about it of the nineteenth century and the Old Bailey. Lawyers today lack the elegance and eloquence which were once their chief distinction and ornament. Lo, the glory has departed.
>
> "You're fucking right, asshole," [the lawyer speaks for our present age].[23]

But laughter also degrades the lofty pretense of the former age since Ed is aware of the deadness of the style itself, not just his imitation of it.

And yet Ed does hold one text sacred—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

It is the book he quotes falling asleep at night, alleviating his loneliness by becoming his idols Huck and Jim. It is the book he cites in the epigraph to the Western novel he is writing, where even the barfly worries what ole Huck would think. And it is Ed's last resort in his own autobiography, retreating to some widow's house where he is comforted at night by a man with black feet. Ed's flight from the present age to Twain's world is doubly appropriate for Vanderhaeghe. First, as Twain himself remarked, "In this book a number of dialects are used . . . I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding."[24] The people in *My Present Age* speak just as dialectically as the folk in Twain; they come to no simple agreement; no sacred cow is left unskewered and no particular language is privileged. But Vanderhaeghe's parody of *Huck Finn* offers its own searching criticism of our modern ideal of freedom. For Ed, the cynical opponent of his age, turns out to be very much its child. His failure to grow up is part of the ideology taken in with our North American language. The laughing image of Twain's word finally shows us the lies we tell ourselves, frees us from social dogma and period-bound speech, even as it begins the process of language renewing itself through a quarrel of dialects.

To conclude, I would say that all these novels make up less an encyclopedia of Saskatchewan life than a grammar of Saskatchewan language, the multiform voices and styles and worldviews of a scant hundred years of history. The strains of nostalgia and escapism heard in most of the books are a protest against the dead end of realism, and yet, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, these books also describe the consequences of a naïve philosophy of freedom. Voice at last supplies the vision by which we can feel at home in our world, be in touch with the past as well as open to our future.

NOTES

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4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. S.E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 56.
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7. Sharon Butala, *Gates of the Sun* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1985), 222.
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9. Geoffrey Ursell, *Perdue: Or How the West Was Lost* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1984), 188.
10. Ibid., 187.
11. Ibid., 196.
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13. Ibid., 76.
14. Ibid., 295.
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20. Guy Vanderhaeghe, *My Present Age* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1984), 110.
21. Ibid., 155.
22. Ibid., 85.
23. Ibid., 120-21.
24. Samuel Clemens, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Norton, 1977), 2.

The Reality of the Flesh

SHARON BUTALA

The ultimate definition of a Saskatchewan novelist would be someone who was born in Saskatchewan, raised here, educated here, lived here most of his or her life, and, I suppose, writes about this place and its people. If we look over the list of people who have been discussed as Saskatchewan novelists, we find much variation in the degree to which any of the above criteria are true: from Carpenter who was born and raised in Alberta and lived most of his life there; to people like David Williams who was raised here, but who left as a young man; to people like myself, Gertrude Story, Lois Simmie, I think Byrna Barclay, Barbara Sapergia, Ken Mitchell, to give an incomplete list, all of whom were born, raised and lived most of their lives here as well as having been educated at our universities and who write about this place and its people. I mention this because Aritha Van Herk discusses writers I do not think of as Saskatchewan.

I think, too, that there is a real, inherent difficulty in trying to judge books about your own world, written by people with the same background, living in the same moment in history and having, in broad terms, a world view which, because it has been shaped by all this, is similar to your own.

Wayne Tefs sets up a dichotomy: the realistic novel versus the visionary, in which he includes the novel of manners, magic realism and apocalyptic fiction. He takes my own first novel and Terrence Heath's *The Last Hiding Place* as examples of realistic writing and uses excerpts from the work of Ursell, Vanderhaeghe and Williams as examples of the visionary. I argue that vision is not the ingredient which separates the so-called realist from the writer of so-called visionary novels. It may be that this argument will, in the end, be reduced to a quibbling about words, and I have not been able to find a better word to call those flights of imagination (which doesn't satisfy me either) that Ursell takes, but claim instead that the word "vision" applies equally to, for example, Heath's *The Last Hiding Place*. Any novel without vision is a contradiction in terms: without vision there is no novel. There is only *Scruples*, romance fiction, and so on.

He speaks of visionary novelists having the object not so much of imitating reality as unmasking it, but this is precisely the ultimate purpose of the realist

too. I cannot accept Tefs's remark that the flaw of the realist novel is that while it forces us to look fate in the face, with bleak results, its failure is *not* to show us a way out of "lives of quiet desperation." Instead, I argue that it is the realist who best shows us that way. I am constantly amazed by the courage of ordinary people, by the flashes of wisdom and insight in the most extraordinary places, by their passion, by their sense of belonging in the universe and their acceptance of all that is inevitable—all this without benefit of education or worldliness, or experience beyond a simple norm. Speaking for not only myself, but for other "realists," this is our vision: the existence, the luminosity of the human soul, which is the true and the only meaning in our "lives of quiet desperation." Life is hard, all our experience tells us that, but what we realists want to show and to repeat over and over again is how hardship serves to hone and educate the spirit. That is what realist novels are about.

Tefs has an interesting footnote: women seem to have been drawn to one, the realistic, particularly in the short story form, while men seem to have been drawn to the visionary. I cannot disagree with this, but it does seem appropriate to turn to feminist theology here and to point out that women too are dreamers, but have a moment-to-moment daily practicality that men are often baffled by and are in awe of, having their eyes set, as they do, on the horizon and the sky. The unavoidable facts of women's physiology, our monthly bleeding, our carrying of a child within our bodies, our lactation, our menopause, all serve to jerk us back again and again to the final reality of the flesh, and perhaps this is why so many of us might be described as realists in the sense that Tefs uses the term.

Tefs's point of view is from that of a critic interested in the writing itself, while I tend to be more interested in questions such as: What do Saskatchewan novelists think about? How do they think it? What has shaped their vision (of life, of the way things are)? What do they fail to see? In what way is their view incomplete and why? This is both with regard to the writers themselves as it is shown in the scope of their books and in the kind of characters they have created and the concerns and ways of thinking of these characters. Ways of expressing all of this, in terms of literary styles, interest me less.

I also want to point out here that what we are talking about are largely first novels and every writer, every artist, undergoes a process of growth and change. It is really too early to make judgements about the Saskatchewan novel. There are not enough of them and they are not yet accomplished enough to stand up to solid scrutiny of this kind. I think that David Williams is the most accomplished

technically and, to the extent the two can ever be separated, Terrence Heath has the most powerful vision.

It is hard to know how to respond to Aritha Van Herk's playful, good-humoured paper, but when she speaks of an "invented space" and a novel as a "false document," even though I recognize that she speaks poetically, as one of Tefs's realists, I have to say that when I go out to the corral and watch my husband breaking a horse, or when I am down at the PFRA corrals helping him eartag and earnotch steers and then sit in the truck, the windows rolled up against the bawling of cattle and the heat and the dust, to write it all down exactly as it was, this place I write about does not feel invented to *me*, and the resulting document is not a false one.

It is easier, too, to speak of invented history and false documents when you are zapping across continents and time zones at five hundred miles an hour, thirty-five thousand feet above the earth, than when you are walking through your wheatfield, seeing your crop cooking in the heat before it has even headed out and you can hear the whole field singing with the steady hum and whirr of grasshoppers, as some of us have done.

I have always operated on the premise that all novelists write from the same small set of motives and that, in the end, all novelists are pretty much alike. But working on this small paper has made me more and more aware of the awful possibility that I may be wrong: that there may be at least two kinds of novelists, radically different in approach and motive. I offer this as a subject for conjecture: that there are those novelists who, when the impulse to write comes upon them, turn to look out the window, or go outside for a long walk across the prairie, or drive out to Fort Walsh, or go to have a talk with an old man; and there are those novelists who go to a literary café, to their bookshelves, to their memories of the great works of other novelists, and to long, learned conversations with scholars where ideas are built and honed. I am one of the former and I view the latter with respect and not a little envy mixed with a dash of perplexity.

I think too that the results of these two kinds of approaches tend to be different: the one inward looking into the country of one's heart and the other outward looking to the literature of the world and to contemporary ideas and fashions; the one a rather homely earnest fiction, the other distinguished by its cleverness and in the mainstream of North American writing which tends to be urban and academic in its concerns and outlook; the one more interested in form and style and in playing with the word itself, the other searching instead for the

story, hoping primarily through the story rather than the style, to express a meaning, an understanding of life. (But I have been so conscious all the time that I have been struggling to say all this, that these are only words, and that the same words can mean different things, and that the longer I struggle the deeper I sink into a quagmire of ifs and buts. Why is it that when I sit down to write a story words seem hard and powerful, each one like a sacred stone clutched in the hand, but the same words when used in literary criticism suddenly turn slippery as eels?)

I do, however, share Aritha Van Herk's sense of waiting, and it is my understanding that Tefs is waiting too, and speaking with my writer friends, I think they are also waiting for that one final novel that says all the things each of us wants said about Saskatchewan. That book may not have been written yet, and it is just possible that it may never be, that we will have to be content with a body of literature *all* of which must be read for a full portrayal. But I know too, without asking, that each one of us secretly wishes to be the one who writes it.

Our literature is growing steadily in both quantity and quality. I think the most significant change since Ross, McCourt and W.O. Mitchell has been that instead of having protagonists who view the land as "other," as a force at least indifferent to the humans who live on it and at the most, directly malevolent, we now have a generation of writers who understand and love this land, and who, as much as it is possible, know how to live on it, and even when fully able to move elsewhere, do not. This produces a literature that celebrates this place, that accepts it as a part of our lives. This understanding at last allows us to begin to turn to other considerations as Vanderhaeghe and Simmie have already done and, as I expect, more and more of us will do from now on.

Collective Theatre and the Playwright: Jessica, *by Linda Griffiths and Maria Campbell*

DIANE BESSAI

If a main strength in the new Canadian drama of the past fifteen years lies in its specific rendering of regional experience, the collective creations of the 1970s did much to set that pattern of regionality. Thus in the 1980s we are seeing a variety of types of new play emerging from that regional-collective tradition. These are plays written by former actors in collectives which reflect, although not necessarily imitate, the collective creation and its particular kind of play-making techniques. One result is an experimental non-naturalistic drama, of which *Jessica*, a collaboration by Linda Griffiths and Saskatchewan writer Maria Campbell, is an exciting example. The revised play of 1986 was an outstanding critical success in eastern Canada, but as the audiences of Saskatoon's 25th Street Theatre will recall, the play had its premiere there in November, 1982.

The audience might also recall that one of the most talented collective performers at 25th Street in the 1970s was Linda Griffiths: in the first theatrically ground-breaking version of *Paper Wheat*, for example, and before that in artistic director Andras Tahn's first collective creation *If You're so Great Why are You in Saskatoon?* and later in *Generation and 1/2*. In these plays, with her gift for comedy, her vivid idiomatic language and her talent for turning a tidy dramatic parable, the writer hidden within the performer was already apparent. A turning point in her career came in the summer of 1978 when she joined the Theatre Passe Muraille collective, under the direction of Paul Thompson (the initiator of collective creation at 25th Street), for *Les Maudits Anglais*, a Quebec touring show, for which poet Gary Geddes was the writer. Although her main character was Myrna Potash, a Ukrainian-Canadian reporter in search of Quebec separatists, the seeds for a later success were sown in that play, with Griffiths also playing Pierre Trudeau behind a cut-out figure of the prime minister. It was Thompson's idea from this that she create a show in which she play

both Trudeau and his wife Margaret. In the late autumn of 1979, *Maggie and Pierre* had its previews in Toronto, a successful run in the new year at Theatre Passe Muraille, followed by a western tour in which Saskatoon was the first stop. The play was an outstanding success (except in New York) for nearly two more years, with actress Patricia Oatman taking on its multiple role-playing in the autumn of 1981. Meanwhile another idea for a different kind of play, *O. D. on Paradise*, in collaboration with actor Patrick Brymer, was already in the works, to premiere at 25th Street Theatre in cooperation with Theatre Passe Muraille in the winter of 1982. The first version of *Jessica* was premiered at 25th Street the following autumn, again under the direction of Paul Thompson.

In case this account is starting to sound like an eastern takeover of supposedly prairie regional drama in Saskatchewan, let me hasten to introduce a less parochial way of looking at these matters. It has much to do with the real nature of the Canadian theatre enterprise in its status as an emergent art form. At their most creative, Canadian theatre and drama have depended on a network of gifted people, country-wide, whose commitment to alternative theatre—which is to say, Canadian theatre—as a principle has been a shaping force of the individual regional strengths. The chief of these has been the discovery and performance of regional stories, for which the collective creation is a seminal influence in the alternative theatre movement. In the words of Linda Griffiths, collective creation "aimed at capturing the perspectives that mainstream culture was likely to ignore."[1] This is the general context in which I feel free to discuss *Jessica*. It was made possible as a play because of a creative network that includes 25th Street Theatre, its performers and audiences, as well as others, like Passe Muraille director Paul Thompson, writer Maria Campbell and performer-writer Linda Griffiths, for a time resident in Saskatoon via Montreal and Toronto.

Jessica is a vivid and concretely rendered feminine journey of self-discovery and spiritual growth. On its simplest narrative level of flashback it recovers crucial highlights of Jessica's story from broken childhood and marital desertion to the traumas of prostitution, drug addiction, and later to native activism and concurrent spiritual discontents. However, this material, in its naturalistic dimension drawn from Maria Campbell's autobiographic *Halfbreed* (1973), goes well beyond the "familiar tale of native oppression" and "cultural schizophrenia" noted by the *Macleans's* reviewer at the time of the 25th Street premiere.[2] Rather, the material from *Halfbreed* provides the points of departure for something far more complex in theme and more radical in dramaturgy than,

for example, the sociology of oppression in George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Maria Campbell's later interests in the spiritual traditions of the Plains Indians are testimony to the thematic complexity in *Jessica*: in Griffiths's words, "the stories are hers and the sibyl is from her, while the writing and structure are mine."[3]

The play is structured on a "mixed blood ceremony" that provides the basis for flashbacks, which are actually Jessica's dream visions of her past, not their naturalistic reconstruction. For several years she has been visiting an old medicine woman, Vitaline, who is trying to teach her how to accept the spirit forces, the "animals" she has the gift to see but has been rejecting since childhood. That she is half white creates particular conflicts in the mystical journey, but in Indian terms, Jessica is struggling to summon the visionary power to "sing her own song." The ceremony is Vitaline's evocation of the animal spirits, Crow, Bear, Coyote, Wolverine and Unicorn, each of whom embodies an important character element in Jessica, also manifest in the special people in her past and present. The animal spirits, in agreeing to take her back through her life, do so through a series of interventions by which they openly transform themselves into the people of the dream vision as appropriate to their own particular forms of power. The idea is not merely naturalistic flashback, therefore, although many such scenes are played naturalistically; the human guise of the animal spirits is part of the ceremony, the intention to provide Jessica with clear parables of meaning to certain key moments of her life. Thus Coyote becomes Vitaline; Bear transforms into Sam, who is Jessica's Red Power lover; Unicorn becomes Liz, her prostitute friend; and Wolverine becomes certain white men in her life. The comical Crow, Jessica's feckless childhood guardian spirit, with a passion for poolhalls and racetracks, is mostly, but not always, himself.

Since the animal spirits are a full and continuing presence in the play, the audience is always privy to their actions and their views on the actions of others. As masked figures they occupy an upper level of the stage, which serves as a kind of Cree Olympus. Far from solemn and remote deities, they chat and argue among themselves as they determine who will next enter Jessica's dream moments. To participate as people, they simply doff their masks and enter the human levels of the stage, either the middle space, which is the Métis world of Vitaline's kitchen, once Jessica's family home, or the bottom level, which is variously a whorehouse, Sam and Jessica's apartment and the city world of white encounters. The play's achievement lies in its vivid theatrical integration of fabular elements and contemporary realities.

Like the collective creation play from which it derives, *Jessica* has gone through several stages of development before reaching its present, and still not necessarily final form. The original idea was instigated by Paul Thompson in 1979 when he approached Maria Campbell about a dramatization of *Halfbreed* that would include material cut from the original manuscript by its editor and also concentrate on her journey since its publication. From the late 1970s Thompson's work for Theatre Passe Muraille began to shift away from the documentary and sociological thrust of collective creation exemplified, for example, in *The West Show* (1975). He was turning to Canadian prose texts, such as Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* and Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man*, because he wanted to develop their potential for surreality and fantasy on stage, which he did in 1980 and 1981, respectively. In his collaboration with novelist Rudy Wiebe on *Far as the Eye Can See* in 1977 (a play that investigates the stripmining of prime farmland in Alberta), a supernatural element had already entered the work. At Wiebe's suggestion they created the Regal Dead, three historical ghosts, Chief Crowfoot, Aberhart and the Princess Alberta Louise, to function as comic interveners in the present-day farmers' issue.

For the *Jessica* project Thompson and Campbell undertook workshops, discussion and research for two years, but the improvisational work began in earnest in the summer of 1982 at Theatre Network in Edmonton. Linda Griffiths joined the project as performer-writer along with actors Bob Bainborough, Graham Greene and Tantoo Martin (Cardinal); the latter two are native actors. Three of these four had worked previously in collectives: Martin in the 25th Street remount of *Don'tcha Know, With You and the North Wind in My Hair*; Bainborough in the first *Paper Wheat*, notably as Ed Partridge; and Griffiths as already indicated. Maria Campbell's film-writing experience included a collective documentary, *Edmonton's UnWanted Women*, for CBC television. By the end of the summer, Griffiths records, "we had characters, situations, but little material which could be used verbatim."[4]

With the 25th Street Theatre opening of *Jessica* scheduled for November, the principals, Thompson, Campbell and Griffiths, worked through another stage of the collective process at Theatre Passe Muraille in the early autumn. Griffiths writes: "Maria, Paul and I met in the BackSpace and, using the characters and basic scenes we had, I 'jammed' the entire play while they continued to direct, hone, and feed in new ideas." This occurred over a three-week period during which the sessions were taped and "transcribed into a loose script."

For the opening, three of the four actors of the summer workshop were in the cast; Martin as Vitaline and Liz, Green as Bear and Sam, and Griffiths as Jessica. Bainborough's roles of Crow and Jessica's white lawyer friend were taken over by Thomas Hauff. The programme credited Griffiths with the dialogue, Campbell with the subject matter and Thompson with the structure. This rough identification of the division of labour gave some reviewers a handy critical prod into flaws that they implied were no more than to be expected from a play patched together by a committee. But the most intelligent comments came from Caroline Heath, in the *NeWest Review*, who appreciated the playfulness of the Métis sensibility and "the deeper than sociological" intentions; but she also noted that the play needed more work, a recognition confirmed by Maria Campbell herself, who indicated they would be going back to it in a few months.[5] Months turned into years. Griffiths recounts that she was finally inspired to return to the play in 1984 after working with Caryl Churchill on *Fen* at the Public Theatre in New York. Churchill's play, she said, made her realize the further possibilities for mixing the real and superreal. She rewrote the play four times over the next year or so, but with "the final elements coming in during a two week session . . .with Maria at Gabriel's Crossing" in the autumn of 1985. The new production opened at Theatre Passe Muraille in April 1986, under the direction of its latest dramaturge, Clarke Rogers.

Even in the structural and thematic refinements of the revised play, it seems clear that its origins in collective play-making procedures are what have made this imaginative work possible. Thematically the basic conception, through Maria Campbell, derives from Cree cosmology with its perception of the unity of spirit life, or soul, in all living things. But the technique for combining this with her *Halfbreed* material into a workable ceremonial structure comes from the collective's presentational mode of theatre, where the lines between fantasy and actuality are less sharply drawn than in conventional naturalistic drama. Two elements particularly telling in the creating of *Jessica* are the collective's discontinuous scenic units and multiple characterization.

In the collective plays of the 1970s, an episodic or anecdotal structure served the epic-documentary intentions of plays like *Paper Wheat* or *The West Show*, or even a loosely plotted play (with its futuristic time shifts) such as *Generation and 1/2*. These also borrow, as did Brecht, from revue and cabaret. Thus collective works mix music, sketches and monologue, the dramatic relation of the scenes to each other depending on juxtaposed rather than continuous action. Needless to say, there is a pragmatic element here: the episodic unit is the most

easily managed in improvisational play-making. Then it is the director's function in the jamming sessions to determine how well the units are shaping and energizing each other in a theatrical way that serves the theme or narrative. A flashback structure lends itself to the method because by nature the flashback process is itself discontinuous.

In the first version of *Jessica*, the present-time ceremonial moments are boldly intercut with both naturalistic and supernaturalistic flashbacks. In the ceremony itself the supernatural is present through Vitaline's evocation of Bear, as presiding spirit, and the ubiquitous Crow. As Jessica's guardian, Crow plausibly enters several of the flashback moments as well. More vivid as a theatrical moment than coherent as dramatic structure, however, is the late one-episode introduction of the full animal spirit pantheon (still in the flashback context) halfway through the play. This briefly introduces the new animal spirit characters, Coyote and Wolverine, and rather belatedly sets up a structural convention in the play, which is the explicit identification of spirit figures with human counterparts. Significantly, though, this solitary "Group Spirit Scene" is the *donnée* for the playwrights' later rationalization of the new structure in which they cast all the episodes of the play into a mythological parable of supernatural intervention. Now the only human character is Jessica herself. The rest are animal spirits who perform human roles.

In collective creation, multiple characterization may be partly expedience, but more importantly, it also establishes a special relation between performance and audience. It usually indicates that actors are giving a demonstration of character rather than a naturalistic representation. Instead of invoking audience empathy for character, this technique seeks audience engagement in the performance of character as an interpretive process. In *Maggie and Pierre*, for example, the transformation of one performer into three distinct characters alerts the audience to the play's interpretive as opposed to mimetic intention. A three-actor production of the same play would impose naturalistic expectations on a work plainly offered as the writer's imaginary rendering of the very public private life the Trudeaus. The multiple characterizations of collective plays depend largely on transformational body language and voice, minimally on sets, props and costume, and the audience is thus made party to the frankly stated theatricality of the performance procedures.

The first version of *Jessica* in part advanced the use of multiple characterization by establishing a thematic relation between some of the characters performed by the same actors. Bear and Sam, Coyote and Vitaline, and, for a

time, Jessica and Wolverine are explicitly identified, although the structural rationale for this is rather hit-and-miss. Thus, while there is a rough irony in the Vitaline actor also playing the prostitute Liz, this has no bearing on the Vitaline-Coyote identification. Nor is there any clear connection established by the Crow actor's multiple performances of a GWG salesman in a more or less naturalistic prostitution scene, and the white lawyer who helps to bring out the wolverine side of Jessica.

In revision, the partial human and animal spirit identifications as such disappear into the fabular mode. The now five spirits of the ceremony (Unicorn is the new one) are interveners rather than merely catalysts for Jessica's dream-vision recollection, and their links with the human characters they play are more clearly established. But the seeds for the development towards this structural formalization are inherent in the initial phase of collective creation's customary multiple character improvisation. Now the animal spirits together represent the components of Jessica's own soul, each of which she must recognize and bring into equilibrium; multiple characterization is therefore integrated to its full presentational capacity in the play. The animal spirits function both as audience to what is going on and performers in the action as the need occurs. They are party to their own collective creation, so to speak, in which they interpret Jessica to herself, as well as to the actual audience. In other words, performance has become essential to the plot.

In *Jessica* there is also a general thematic connection to the collective theatre as well as a formal one. In a 1983 interview Griffiths says, "It was in the collective that I got encouragement to go for the female perspective. That was part of the populist ethos of collective theatre which aimed at capturing the perspectives that mainstream culture was likely to ignore."[6] Her typically untypical women of her collective work are witness to this direction as is her essentially sympathetic interpretation of Maggie, broken but still defiant in her conflict between flower-child notions of love and freedom and Pierre's male-centred rationality and sense of public decorum. In *O.D. on Paradise*, Candy, the ex-hippy wife of a career-anxious lawyer, is trapped in the role of beguiling and nurturing female. Karen, her opposite, is a liberated professional woman who theorizes that the feminine fight for mutual independence is a necessary and heroic struggle. Even if the men have to be allowed to go crazy in the process, women, she says, must face "the oldest dragon there is . . . or they'll have it over us forever."

In outline Karen anticipates Jessica's struggle with Sam: in his discourage-

ments at the bureaucratic frustrations of his political crusade, he expects a solacing ego-stroking role from her. He jokingly notes how he best likes the look that "says I'm your Iroquois brave and you're my vermin infested halfbreed." In the parlance of old Vitaline (with a little assistance from the hovering Unicorn), the whole earth is suffering from an imbalance between sun and moon dating back the thousands of years since women were persuaded by the "glory in sacrifice" to submit to the dominance of men:

> He took and she gave and gave until there was nothing left but migraine headaches and sacrifice. The balance was broken. The whole earth has to do with that balance, the tides and the winds and the growth of everything. Nothing can be right again without it, nothing.

In *Halfbreed*, Maria Campbell makes only one, incidental, reference to the women's wisdom that Sam fears from Jessica's tutelage from the old medicine woman. The narrator is seeking to explain to herself why a once supportive male Indian friend changed his attitude towards her when she ventured to speak out in public meetings. She tries to explain this when she writes

> The missionaries had impressed upon us the feeling that women were a source of evil. This belief, combined with the ancient Indian recognition of the power of women, is still holding back the progress of our people today.[7]

By this I take her to mean that the current attitude towards women is based on the unfortunate misunderstanding of Indian tradition imposed on it by Christian zealotry. Elsewhere in *Halfbreed* is the narrator's deep expression of love and admiration for her great-grandmother Campbell, or Cheechum, who was the emotional support and teacher of her childhood:

> She taught me to see the beauty in all things around me; that inside each thing a spirit lived, that it was vital too regardless of whether it was only a leaf or a blade of grass, and by recognizing its life and beauty I was accepting God.[8]

The old lady, a niece of Gabriel Dumont, had the gift of second sight, but she was cautious of using it. There is no indication that Cheechum was a medicine woman, but she may be the prototype of Vitaline, and certainly of the grandmother who appears in the childhood dream vision to make Jessica the gift of her Crow guardian. In her children's book *People of the Buffalo*, Campbell distinguishes between the nature of the spiritual gifts of Indian women and men.

"Some people," she writes, "think that in the Indian way of life the boy was glorified; on the contrary, the girl was considered spiritually stronger, because like the earth she gives life." She outlines how Plains Indian boys at puberty had to go on a quest for a vision of their guardian spirit, who was revealed through fasting and meditation. For girls, in contrast, "The menstrual cycle brought power to communicate freely with the spirits." Because at the time of the onset the spirits around her were uncontrolled, however, "The young girl was lodged in a teepee away from the camp, where she was guarded for four days by an old medicine woman who could communicate with and control the spirits."[9]

In the play, Jessica has these spiritual gifts; she has been "seeing" the animals all her life but has tried to ignore them, particularly Crow. She has no instruction in her youth from an old woman with knowledge and power to accept and to control them. Only in her chronological maturity does she begin to value her natural gifts, and as the process of vision intensifies under Vitaline's ceremonial direction, control of the spirits is difficult. For example, Jessica goes wild and vicious when her spirit is possessed by Wolverine.

Integral to the spiritual journey, of course, is its basis in the very specific circumstances of the Métis struggle between two worlds. In several ways Jessica makes the point that she is naturally drawn to the white world. The canny way in which Vitaline acknowledges the conflict is to initiate her ultimate ceremonial effort by naming the contents of Jessica's luggage as her "bundle": her high-heels mark the four sacred directions, papers from Jessica's work are the centre of the circle and she herself is instructed to don her bathrobe and plug her walkman into her ears. This is hardly obscurantist shamanism, but rather a spiritualism pragmatically rooted in the facts of the modern world. Throughout the play, the sense of this is reinforced by the earthy, humourous tone of the whole ceremonial venture and sustained by the idiomatic quality of the dialogue at all levels.

In the revised play, the idea of ancient feminine power under siege over the millennia is lightly extended by the introduction of the anachronistic Unicorn to the pantheon of Jessica's animal spirits. Structurally this provides an organic spirit counterpart to Liz, especially suitable if the latter is played as a white woman. Narratively, Unicorn, as the spirit of archaic female sexual mysteries, introduces herself to the other spirits as "what's been missing" in the ceremony so far. She tells them that she is "a bit of the goddess left over" whose "horn was for women to ride when women had power, and when they lost it, this horn made them remember." Her incongruity in the Plains Indian context is comical-

ly confronted head on by remarks from the others. Coyote has seen her at The Bay: "you had a big pink bow and you were sitting on a candy cane rainbow." To Crow she is a "fugitive from a mouldy French tapesty." Bear, on the other hand, begins to recollect her as a more ancient embodiment "of the old way" that they all represent.

Although Unicorn is good for the play, she has not yet quite found a comfortable place in its scheme. Her first important intervention, with Bear and Crow (and a dash of Wolverine) at her service, is certainly the most self-conscious and mythologically mixed in its intention of reminding Jessica of the "old way." In her intervention as Liz, she is Jessica's instructor in the wiles of prostitution. As Unicorn, she reminds the other spirits of the familiar feminist point, that prostitution was once "sacred and beautiful" in its ceremonial purpose when "Men were cleansed through lying with the priestesses." The curious part comes when Bear and Crow agree (Crow reluctantly) to play the roles of clients, disguised, as it were, as themselves (Wolverine is a waiter). Bear, who is more attuned to Unicorn's meaning, thinks to help Jessica to "rake away the shame." Crow, who is more down to earth, asks "what shame?" Thus the two descend in their masks to the hotel room as if clients for a session of kinky sex. Instead, however, they introduce the women to the ancient meaning of their trade, stand them back-to-back in blindfolds and teach them to chant the "Whore Prayer," an invocation to the Goddess through a litany of her several ancient names. As the "clients" vanish, the two women slip into some wistful chat about the wonders of inspired sexuality. The scene is both funny and a little pretentious (the whole effect a little like essay-writing for Myth 101, as one reviewer noted); wittingly or unwittingly it verges on send-up with its combination of Indian animal spirits as Ishtarian adepts and the bawdy remarks by Liz. This scene, unlike most of the other dream-vision interventions, imposes meaning rather than letting it emerge spontaneously from the context. Crow, for one, better belongs in the darker sequence quickly following; this time he actually transforms—into the character of Weird Harold, in a parodic "S and M" scene that makes Jessica vomit.

However, to criticize in this manner is not to disparage the already high level of achievement clearly evident in *Jessica*. As with the collective mode of play from which it grew, the text is not sacrosanct as long as there are areas for its further unfolding. Also like the collective, this has to happen through more of what actor-dramatist Linda Griffiths calls "writing on the spot," which is to say through her kind of creative improvisational workshopping, a technique begun on a modest scale when there were few scripted works available, now respon-

sible for the new (unfortunately rare) level of dramaturgical bravura in Canadian drama that *Jessica* represents. As in the 1970s, so in the present, the small, alternative theatres everywhere in the country are still the most open to taking the risks that can lead to the creation of a fine new experimental play.

NOTES

1. Alice Klein, "Griffiths' Collective Works," *Now* (14-23 February 1983): 14.
2. Mark Czarnecki, "Cultural Schizophrenia," *Maclean's* (15 November 1982): 78.
3. Interview on CBC's "State of the Arts," 3 May 1987.
4. Linda Griffiths, "A Transformation," Theatre Passe Muraille programme for *Jessica: A Transformation*, 20 March 1986. Further quotations are from this source.
5. Caroline Heath, review of *Jessica*, *NeWest Review* (December 1982): 5.
6. Klein, "Griffiths' Collective Works."
7. Maria Campbell, *Halfbreed* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1979), 168.
8. Ibid., 82.
9. Maria Campbell, *People of the Buffalo* (Vancouver: J.J. Douglas, 1976), 21-22.

Saskatchewan Playwriting: Trends and Directions

KIM McCAW

I am from Saskatchewan. I say that often, even though I now live and work in Manitoba. It informs almost every aspect of my life. Born in Prince Albert; raised there until the age of twelve; then a year in Saskatoon before moving to Regina where my teenage years shaped my life. Like so many of my peers, I took the first opportunity I could to leave the province, spending the obligatory few years in a collection of different cities—Victoria, Montreal, Toronto—before finding out the inevitable truth: that I could not really exist outside the prairies, and probably outside Saskatchewan. In 1976 I returned to work for three months in a School Touring Production for the Globe Theatre. I did not leave until 1983. In my heart I have never left.

In many ways, I grew up with the Summer School of the Arts. I followed in the footsteps of my teachers who so profoundly influenced me, Ken and the late Sue Kramer, to eventually work for their Globe Theatre and to teach the very classes for five summers that they had taught to me. During that time I learned some of the history of the place and began to meet others who had been shaped and enriched by it. There are many of us who owe a great debt of gratitude to the visionaries and foot soldiers who made that place happen and who spent the time with us to help us start to grow into the artists we wanted to be. Be they Florence James or the Kramers or Peter Gallagher (who taught me how to teach) in the field of Drama, or Ken Mitchell or Eli Mandel or the myriad other important men and women who guided the writing programme and all the others in the other disciplines, we owe them all a great debt for the artistic legacy they have left for our province.

I do not mean simply to get lost in happy statements about my Saskatchewan youth. You see, I think that there is something to be learned from my particular brand of provincial chauvinism and how it relates to the directions playwriting has taken over the years. Our image of ourselves and the place where we have all chosen to live is the single most powerful force informing the choices writers make as they seek to describe that experience.

So what are we anyway? Who do we think we are? Sometimes we are a group of farmers constantly battling a system and an environment that will not even consider being fair. Sometimes we are righteous prairie visionaries, carving out progressive plans for the future that we know will eventually be adopted by the country as a whole. Sometimes we are rogues or outlaws battling against outside oppressors (usually from the East) and usually outwitting them in the end. And very often we are lunatics or mad people, driven to acts of outrageousness or even insanity by the brutal climate and numbing loneliness of the unending landscape around us. Rarely are we contemporary urbanites caught up in the swirl of careers and compromises that we so easily use to typify life in "the East."

One of the most accurate, and certainly the wittiest, oversimplified descriptions of prairie writing comes from David Arnason:

> Prairie writing since Frederick Philip Grove and Sinclair Ross is understood to take place in an endless depression, where crops by definition fail. Silent powerful men who display no emotion yearn for some vision of establishment. They set out to establish dynasties and in the process brutalize the women who accompany them. In a world without trees, without water, without birds, under a pitiless sun in the summer, under a bitter stormdriven sky in the winter, a sensitive young boy grows to manhood. Minor changes are possible, but those are the elements.[1]

In an interview with Robert Wallace, Ken Mitchell reinforces this potentially chauvinistic self-image when he says, "I think that Prairie people and Prairie writers and artists take a vaster view of things . . . I guess I'm really talking as a country person rather than as a Prairie Person. I think country people have a bigger view of the world is what I'm trying to say."[2] Comforting words, and certainly the thing to say to make us all feel a little more important and larger than life for a few moments, but also fraught with pitfalls.

Two important points need to be addressed here: first, we need to better understand how these images of ourselves are used in the theatre and to what purpose they have been chosen; and, second, we need to ask just how accurate these images are today and if they still offer the sort of enlightenment that we require from a vital, growing theatre.

Theatre can and should play a role in the creation of myth out of historical reality; but it can also lead into some dangerous territory, since myth often by necessity avoids any genuine critical analysis of the event it celebrates. Thus, we look to our theatrical events to give us both a sense of pride in our collective

heritage, but also some insight into the value of each event as it relates to our contemporary situation. The struggle here is to maintain a healthy balance between the comfort and safety of populism and the harsh, doctrinaire approach of pure documentary infused with a particular editorial bias. Entertainment is always essential, but entertainment at the expense of fresh insight is not worth spending time or money creating.

Perhaps the single best-known (and loved) play ever created in this province is *Paper Wheat*. A collective creation of Saskatoon's 25th Street Theatre, this show represented a milestone in theatre for all of us. Not that it was by any means a definitive piece of theatre in and of itself, but, rather, because of the phenomenal impact it had. We can learn much by looking for the secrets of that success.

Paper Wheat came at a time when Saskatchewan was thirsting for a fresh look at itself. It touched a collective nerve and made us all feel a sense of personal pride and ownership in the historic struggle of farmers to gain some degree of control over their own destiny. One of the strengths of Saskatchewan is that so many of us, even if we never actually lived on a farm, feel a genuine closeness to that way of life. The story of the formation of the Wheat Pool is a shared story, a myth in which we can all imagine ourselves participating. The play allowed people to do just that. The struggle against the greedy and exploitative grain companies from elsewhere was shown as a righteous one, one that had to be won in order for our province to become the haven for independence it now is. The play's happy ending was our happy ending, too.

This play broke ground by telling the pioneers' story back to us and making us believe that it was a great story. The creators of the play communicated a respect and love for those rebels and independent thinkers that led the cooperative movement and made us feel proud to have them as our ancestors. In his introduction to the published text of the play, Don Kerr concludes with a similar analysis: "To make a cooperative is the work of a hundred hands; to make a collective like *Paper Wheat* is also the work of a hundred hands, and of so much skill—even enough to measure up to the skill of the farmer and his wife who proved up to that quarter section in the early years and organized the great cooperatives."[3] The play allowed us to feel a sense of shared ownership of our past and gave us a pride in that possession.

But it is not without problems. *Paper Wheat* is really only a fair play. The text depended on a powerful director's stamp and some talented performers to make the real magic occur. It succeeded because we all knew the story, or at least we

thought we did. We had all grown up hearing bits and pieces of the saga from parents and grandparents, but, with the exception of some enthusiastic history students, none of us had a complete picture we could look to and understand just exactly what happened. When this play came along, we had the opportunity to get that whole picture, we felt. Whether or not it was in reality a completely accurate picture became irrelevant.

Another example of a popular historical play from Saskatchewan is Rex Deverell's "one-man collective," *Medicare!* It would be too easy and quite inaccurate to tar this show with the same brush as *Paper Wheat*. While each took long looks at important social and political events of our past and while each made deep emotional impacts on their respective audiences, the two plays are really quite different. In *Medicare!* Deverell made the decision to abandon the "traditional" collective creation approach pioneered by Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille and transported to this province by Paul Thompson during his brief sojourns with 25th Street Theatre.

The Passe Muraille method basically revolved around a collective of actors and a director/story editor/dramaturge descending upon a somewhat unsuspecting community in order to research whatever story or event or phenomenon the particular show was interested in. The collective group would glean stories and incidents from the community, then retire to the rehearsal hall where they would dramatize them through improvisation and discussion. Eventually, a composite sketch of the event was created, polished and presented as a finished show. Often, as in the case of both *Paper Wheat* in this province, and the classic of the genre, *The Farm Show* in Ontario, they turn out to be interesting, entertaining theatrical events. It was valuable as a technique that aided theatres in finding ways to get our local stories on to our stages.

In the long run, however, the collective runs into some serious artistic shortcomings. Because it is a cooperative event almost by definition, it depends upon a democratic process in the selection of material presented, and, more importantly, in the point of view that the show takes regarding the event or subject being examined. This democracy of opinion ultimately fails to offer any lasting critical insight into the actual *meaning* of the event. And I do not think there is any way in which it can.

When it came to doing a play about the introduction of medicare to Saskatchewan and the ensuing furor that legislation created, Deverell was wise to assume the dictatorial role he did. It allowed him absolute freedom to select or discard the various incidents or individuals that best illuminated his personal

vision of the event. He was able to assemble a specific argument around and about the story that went somewhat beyond a simple retelling of history or taking a nostalgic journey to relive a few of our past glories. This play managed to combine a factual re-enactment of many of the events surrounding the introduction of the controversial legislation with a few scenes from Deverell's own pen that shed some satiric light on the whole affair. Virtually all of the words spoken in the historical sections were drawn directly from primary source documents and merely edited for presentation onstage. The editorial process proved to be crucial in the development of this text. There was, of course, a vast collection of material to draw from: Hansard, internal government memos and correspondence, newspaper clippings and commentaries, letters to the editor, and more. It became Deverell's task to determine what approach to recreating the series of events should be taken and to find the material that would best allow that to take place. Because of the solitary nature of that decision-making process, *Medicare!* had a fairly distinct bias in its telling, a bias that may not have been so clearly realized if it had arisen out of a traditional collective.

The production of the play was a tremendous success. Standing-room-only audiences were the order of the day when the show was presented in the Globe's temporary home in Regina's Trianon Ballroom. The very location offered occasion for a whole new level of dramatic action, because it was the site of one of the single most important confrontations between doctors and government during the medicare crisis. As was the case in performances of *Paper Wheat*, the audiences were celebrating their shared memory, and were excited about reclaiming ownership of this important part of their heritage. The event itself was one that tested our collective characters to the limit in this province, but that very struggle and our eventual victory and reunification as a community appealed once again to the images of ourselves we have worked so hard to create and to preserve. Ultimately, the purpose of *Medicare!* was not so much to advance the argument in any new direction, but rather to examine a past event in order to better understand who we were then and what we may have become as a result.

The response to *Paper Wheat* and *Medicare!* was almost ecstatic. Audiences saw their own stories and past being offered back to them as something to be cherished and savoured. They responded passionately and completely, making the experience memorable for all involved. That was exciting and important. It allowed the theatres and the audiences to learn that plays by and about this province could succeed not only culturally, but also commercially. That sparked a great deal of new activity from the theatrical community. The 25th Street

Theatre followed up with a further history of the Cooperatives, *Generation and 1/2*, and a number of other plays celebrating various aspects of our heritage; and the Globe continued in the documentary vein for one more show, this time a re-creation of the Estevan coal miners' strike and its tragic conclusion, *Black Powder*.

Persephone Theatre in Saskatoon had had its populist hit a few years earlier with Ken Mitchell's country opera adaptation of *Othello*, *Cruel Tears*, but had never really found its way back to that territory until 1982 when it produced Geoffrey Ursell's comic operetta, *Saskatoon Pie!* This spoof of early Saskatchewan politics, the women's movement, sexual philanderings and the CPR had two enormously popular productions, first running in Saskatoon to overflow houses and then travelling across the province a few years later to equally enthusiastic crowds. Again, this play had some real artistic weaknesses, but it appealed strongly to a widely-held vision of who and what we are because of where we live.

This string of populist successes is a source of clues in choosing future directions. Theatres must have audiences in order to survive, and must therefore select plays that people will want to come and see. At the same time, they have the responsibility of presenting works of art that enhance our overall quality of life and which offer new understandings of ourselves and the world we live in with others. These populist anthems celebrating past victories or defeats and confirming old beliefs about ourselves were valuable and important steps in the cultural growth of the province's theatrical life, but it became necessary for the theatres to move beyond this narrow populist historical field. The next task was to establish a body of regional work that used the theatre to present discussions of issues of personal or social morality, or examinations of human failure or triumph, that would illuminate our existence without the dependence on shared past assumptions or the safety of popular myth.

Ultimately, art has the responsibility to tell or show us more than we already know. It cannot be content to merely rework a history lesson or to polish up a rusty memory of a great event. We should use the familiar and the recognizable merely as tools to aid us in the creation of a whole new pattern that will reveal something we had not or could not understand before. When the theatre offers that experience to its audience, something truly important and lasting occurs. People are changed forever. In his political cabaret on the state of Canadian culture, *Welcome to Hard Times*, Manitoba writer David Arnason had a character (a conceptual artist on the run from the futuristic art police) proclaim that "all

art is subversive, because it forces people to see things in a different way, and once they've seen it differently, then they can't ever do the same thing again." A tall order, and perhaps a bit unrealistic, but still worth keeping in mind as a possible goal when we set about creating our various artistic agendas.

The evolution of the material that is being created by playwrights comes out of a process of demand and response involving audience and writer. The overall success of a theatre's choice of playbill in large part depends on the effectiveness of that process. If both audience and theatre have found ways to communicate, then they will realize what next to bring to the conversation. If, however, they are unable or unwilling to participate in this dialogue an ever-widening gap will begin to grow between these partners who cannot exist in the long term without each other.

I realize that I am placing a tremendous amount of the responsibility for determining the direction playwriting needs to go on theatre companies and not on writers. The theatres have the responsibility for producing new plays and the theatres deal with the impact new works make on their audiences. Perhaps it would be more desirable for changes in direction to originate from the writers, but more often than not writers respond to the perceived needs or wishes of the marketplace as represented by the producing theatres. Why offer something that requires the theatre to travel in an entirely new direction if there is no visible sign that it is thinking about making that kind of change?

In recent years there has been some shifting of focus in Saskatchewan plays. There seems to be less dependence on historical or populist material to guarantee credibility or maintain audience expectations, and many of the new works being produced have begun to look at a wider range of subjects or issues, employ a broader range of theatrical styles, and sometimes even take place somewhere other than Saskatchewan! This is exciting.

NOTES

1. David Arnason, "Leaving the Farm: Contemporary Saskatchewan Fiction," in *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing*, ed. E.F. Dyck (Regina: Saskatchewan Writers Guild, 1986), 114.
2. Robert Wallace, "Ken Mitchell," in *The Work: Conversations with English-Canadian Playwrights*, ed. Robert Wallace and Cynthia Zimmerman (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1982), 145.
3. Don Kerr, "*Paper Wheat*: Epic Theatre in Saskatchewan," in 25th Street Theatre, *Paper Wheat: The Book* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1982), 30.

Saskatchewan Playwriting: A Response

REX DEVERELL

I am sure that before beginning her paper Diane Bessai asked herself what constitutes Saskatchewan writing. For me *Jessica* qualifies not so much because of Linda Griffiths's time at 25th Street or the Saskatoon production and even less as a result of its background in collective creations—but because of its roots in Maria Campbell's experience and her writing. For that reason I find it puzzling that no one has documented her participation in the process in any kind of major way. In fact I think there is now a general public perception that *Jessica* is Linda Griffiths's work.

Diane Bessai has shown how the play originated in an idea of Paul Thompson's to do a dramatization based on *Halfbreed* and additional material. She traces how the collective changed, reformed, narrowed and finally became a single writer working closely with Maria Campbell. I think one has to note not only the interprovincial influences at work on the play but even an international influence from the innovative British playwright Caryl Churchill with whom Griffiths worked in the United States. And then the whole process wound up with the acclaimed Toronto production. All this suggests to me that although this is a Saskatchewan play it has been written from the outside in. There is nothing wrong with that but it seems to be the case. So the question that raises itself in my mind is what would this play have been like written within the province and for Saskatchewan audiences?

I am afraid the answers are not entirely satisfying. One possibility is that it would not have been written at all. As far as I know, none of us suggested to Campbell that we would like to do a play based on *Halfbreed*. But suppose someone had—do we have the kind of mutual trust that would permit a writer like Campbell to enter into that kind of cooperative arrangement? I know that territorial prerogative is not unknown among writers—it is worse in the theatre—and I think I can say that the native community is also somewhat sensitive about such things.

But suppose we had managed to get together and suppose we had been able

to fund the project, what then? I suppose there would be quite a difference between what would happen if it had been a Saskatoon production or a Regina one. The likelihood would be that the Saskatoon production would have been close to the actual play that was presented in 1982, but perhaps without the poetic sophistication that was already emerging in that production. If it had taken place in Regina it might have been more directly political—perhaps satirical—but might well have lacked some of the essential characterization and feminist perspective of the 1982 *Jessica.*

If I had been involved I think I would have been concerned with how the text of *Halfbreed* could have informed the text of the play. *Halfbreed* is a book which I have long admired for its luminescence and honesty. I do not think that Thompson really trusts text of any kind and if he uses it at all it is invariably as a jumping-off point, whereas I am always interested in text as a jumping-into point. All of this is really part of a longstanding dispute between Thompson and myself.

At any rate, given the economics of the theatre and the short rehearsal period it is possible that neither production would have been properly finished any more than *Jessica* was in 1982. But unlike that production it would not get another chance. That's the way it is in Saskatchewan. I do not believe it is the way it has to be, however—in fact, none of it has to be this way and maybe we can do something about it.

As I understand it, Bessai is saying that collective creation (a) enabled a performer to find her voice as a writer—i.e. creator of dialogue and structure, (b) was the method of developing *Jessica* in its initial phases, and (c) that two characteristic techniques of collective creation became essential expressive devices in the final form of the play. It is when we arrive at this last point that I have a little trouble, because of what Bessai is saying not about *Jessica* but rather about collective creations. These characteristic devices, episodic construction and multiple characterization, are relatively unessential elements in collective work. They derive more from the scope of the subjects or the source material collectives have often chosen to work with. The predominant quality of a collective is the sense of investment the performers have in the material—their commitment to it, their need to express it, their willingness to go through what can be a very real war to put it up on stage. In fact I sometimes think collective is a misnomer: creation through battle may be a better term. I once saw a wrestling bout on Saturday daytime television that reminded me of a collective creation. They put about thirty wrestlers in the ring and let them all go at one

another until there was only one left. This in fact is what may have happened with *Jessica*.

Bessai's concluding sentence refers to the small alternative theatres as being most open to taking the risks that can lead to the creation of a fine new experimental play. That may well be the case, and in Saskatchewan we should be in good shape because all of our theatres are close to being alternative theatres. In fact, one of the reasons that Saskatchewan is the jewel in the crown of the Dominion is that it has been an alternative society.

When we put Kim McCaw's paper beside Bessai's we see an immediate tension. I think it is the result of two factors. McCaw's experience is essentially the Regina line which as I have already said is different than the Saskatoon one: the collective tradition is present but quite different from the Paul Thompson/Andy Tahn/Linda Griffiths tradition. And much of the new material has come from a writer-centred emphasis. Secondly, McCaw's perspective is also more institutional. He is after all an artistic director and his art is concerned with how to win audiences and influence them. I find as a writer I am more comfortable with work that comes about as a result of a dialogue—really a trialogue between theatres or artistic directors, the community and the writer. The language of producer and marketplace for me is not a helpful language.

As I thought about the two papers, I felt more and more that the major question is that of ownership. Who owns a play? The collective? The writer? The director? The theatre? The community? Elsewhere in the world directors are proceeding directly to poetry and prose and bypassing the playwright altogether. In Saskatchewan, playwrights are emerging from the ranks of poets and prose writers. Initially these writers are less theatrically oriented than writers who have emerged from collectives or other theatrical professions but they are stronger in their sense of the ownership of the text. And I think the fact that such writers are beginning to turn their talents to the theatre is partly a result of a typically Saskatchewan phenomenon of an attempt to create community around playwrights in the form of the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre. The strength of Saskatchewan society has been shared ownership and mutual responsibility. I think the greatest success in our playwriting has had those qualities.

I sent a script off by airvelope recently. The attendant filled out the address and then said, "Oh. Rex Deverell. Are you still writing plays for the Globe?" Pleased to be recognized, I started into a long-winded account of my current psychology and state of trying to get to work on an idea when he said, "I've been

a subscriber for years. I enjoyed the *last* one you wrote. They're getting better!" That's the kind of community ownership I'm talking about. It isn't an altogether comfortable sort of shared ownership.

It is a double-edged sword also because shared responsibility can lead to abdication of responsibility. But I think we can say that part of the social image in Saskatchewan is that within the context of shared ownership individuals have individual visions and they expect to take responsibility for owning up to these visions and allowing others inside.

The Ways of Speech Made Plains: Saskatchewan Poetry Finds Its Voices

SUSAN GINGELL

When in his poem "The Weight" Patrick Lane created the pun "the ways of speech made plains,"[1] he chose a trope that characteristically subverts the stability of language, in the way that a shift in context, either geographical, historical, or cultural, can subvert its stability. This line therefore points both denotatively and formally to one of the major concerns of Lane's poem, a concern that has also been central to the development of Saskatchewan poetry: taking a language and a poetic tradition shaped by a geography, a history, and a culture so different from those of Saskatchewan and making it speak in an authentic way of Saskatchewan experience. A western wind indeed blows across the plains of this province, but it is a qualitatively different wind than the "westron winde" of the Middle English lyric for which Lane finds a place, but which he cannot naturalize, in the mosaic of voices that speak at the end of "The Weight." In the same way, at the beginning of the poem he reports fruitlessly searching in the dictionary of Empire for the words of this place and time, but also for a way of connecting the here and now with the life and poetry of the there and then:

> sometimes called redneck
> (though in my dictionary *Britannica World Language*
> for Empire not included as
> beneath contempt: so in this place
>
> *one who does not know what a suntan is*
> as he who goes out in the sun
> and is marked there as one
> the sun has given tongue to
> (the dog springing on the doe's sweet scent
> giving tongue and running to earth
> which is duty
> not to deny

Though the compendium of "World Language" cannot give tongue to the phenomenon the persona knows as the redneck, still there is the duty not to deny the ground of one's being, whether the ancestors be biological, spiritual, linguistic, or poetic. Thus the persona speaks of

> calling the dead to come
> alive again
> once more
> the sprung
> measure[2]

In the open field form and sprung rhythm of the lines, Lane makes the crucial link to the ancestors, American and British, while writing about the cycle of vegetative renewal so important to the prairie former, who here assumes the specific lineaments of Lane's own forebear Jack Lane.

Patrick Lane's poem goes on to examine the burdens and blessings of inheritance, making, with vivid and acute economy, the point that what in one context may be held to be a universal notion of order, may in another clearly manifest itself as a perversion of order. The point is made through the narrating of an incident that remains horrifically with readers of the poem, involving as it does the brutal inscription of patriarchal power on the female body. Jack Lane takes his daughter out to the barn and savagely whips her for her resistance to his morning ritual of spitting into his children's porridge. Patrick Lane makes clear that readers are to understand the beating as perverted art when he writes of "the rawhide filling/around her in clean blood-lines," before parenthetically recording the practice of Jack Lane's craft:

> (could clip off the head of a *russian thistle*
> at twenty feet practised it every day
> even in winter said he could cut
> the first flake falling
> into three pieces before it hit the ground[3]

Though the poet is clearly confronting a violent family history, the scene, powerful in its own right, becomes emblematic of something beyond itself when Lane interprets the incident as Jack Lane's "writing on [his daughter's] flesh his love for order."[4] If the old order has become a violence, or perhaps always was, what replaces it in this poem is a polyphony of experiences brought together in an open field, elements that do not in the end cohere or formulate a kind of

closure that would suggest a resolved problem, but rather leave the reader with a sense of what remains to be accomplished.

Among the accomplishments with which John Newlove has rightly been credited is his helping to create a voice in which Saskatchewan and other prairie poets could speak.[5] Some of his best known poems are in fact about the struggle to find that voice, create the language and mythology that would be a sign of his connection to a place that did not seem unambiguously his. While aspects of both the racial and sexual politics of "The Pride" are objectionable, it is a poetic statement of undeniable power. Lacking an autochthonous claim to his home, the persona of that poem seeks to legitimize his presence there by effecting an imaginative connection with the ghosts of the indigenous peoples who once "wheel[ed] in their pride/on the[ir] sweating horses." That connection is made not only by authoritative assertion, but also by images, such as that of an Indian spirit purifying, or in the poem's own terms "refreshing," the whites' dwelling places, and by a rehearsal of native names:

> This western country crammed
> with the ghosts of indians,
> haunting the coastal stones and shores,
> the forested pacific islands,
> mountains, hills and plains:
> beside the ocean ethlinga,
> man in the moon, empties
> his bucket, on
> a sign from spirit
> of the wind ethlinga
> empties his bucket, refreshing
> the earth, and it rains
> on the white cities[6]

The poem "The Prairie" is Newlove revealing the linguistic obverse to the mythological side of this coin that seeks to purchase connection, language here becoming the "dirt" of the excreta from animals that "the prairie fed, foddered, /food for generations." That food is clearly more than physical nourishment, because the poem begins with a series of verbal generations, verbal play replacing sexual play as one word gives birth to another when its elements are rearranged or its sounds shifted:

> One compiles, piles, plies
> these masses of words, verbs,

massifs, mastiffs barking meaning,
dried chips
of buffalo dung, excreta from beasts

Newlove candidly confesses to "invented remembrance" in this poem, yet though "Scenes shake, /the words do not suffice." For all the persona's straining to be that "impossible thing," "the other's/twin," he knows that he will never

. . . be at ease, but always migrating
from city to city
seeking some almost seen
god or food or earth or word.[7]

A much more recent work of a Saskatchewan native, the long poem Grasshopper, by Helen Hawley, echoes Newlove's conclusion when, with a fine sense of paradox, it laments "It's an earthstepper's werth/to wander all over is fixed."[8] Hawley, who now resides in England, uses the figurative language of the Anglo-Saxon poet, such as the kenning "earthstepper" for "grasshopper," to express her sense of distance from what was once her prairie home. Simultaneously she allusively establishes her elegaic tone by citing lines from the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Wanderer" in her epigraph. Moreover, in sometimes employing an approximation of the Anglo-Saxon alliterative half-line, and sometimes allowing her words to stretch across the expected midline break, she formally encodes her desire to bridge the distance between her present situation and her prairie past. In the wrenched syntax of her assertion "not even as Tourist can be birthplace touched/the glass is always between"[9] she does more than recognize how time and the transience of living things make it impossible to go home again; the green glass of the bus window through which she looks again on the landscapes of her youth is also a symbol for language, which allows a reader to see through to a certain reality beyond, but which by its nature alters what is seen. Her language, tone, and form are remarkably well-suited to her theme.

If Hawley's language reflects her movement from the prairies to the cradle of English, albeit encompassing the visitor's return, Anne Szumigalski's language reflects her movement in the opposite direction. It is the Celt and the Angle who, in "A House with a Tower," represent the internally competing cultural traditions, who "together . . . /walk solitary/by a muddy puddle-edge," and who

must consciously instruct both selves and reader in the language of place: "(call it a slough.)"[10] The world of her poetry is constructed primarily with the materials of a British cultural heritage, particularly the British poetic tradition, but one of the fascinating things about this poem is the way it records the conjunctions and competitions of different sets of cultural assumptions, not only those of the Celt and the Angle, but also those of the European and the Canadian prairie dweller.

Szumigalski's redeployment of Judeo-Christian myth, particularly the Eden myth in "The Compassion," as well as in other poems collected in *Dogstones*, makes an interesting contrast to that of Lorna Crozier in *The Garden Going On Without Us*. Both poets have available to them the concept of the prairie garden, the would-be New Eden, and what they make of it is not altogether different. But whereas Szumigalski effects a kind of modernist revision, while remaining inside the Judeo-Christian mythic construct, Crozier is impelled to a more radical replacing. Szumigalski's angels, hard to catch sight of in their ascent, pierce a "canopy of ozone . . . as they ascend from the tangent plane at any of the possible angles." There is a playful quality in the shift from angels to angles in Szumigalski's phrasing, but further possibilities for the meaning of these angels are constructed by the later description of them as "god's pupils [who] see us." Angels then may be ways of looking, angles of perspective, as well as students of the divine, but their descent leading to a presence among us is "harder still to perceive" than their ascent. Szumigalski describes them in terms evocative of European classical pictorial art: "their legs slightly parted the ball of each pale foot poised over that house of many rooms." They remain palely mystic above the human community, looking down on what we have made of the garden. A Christian-centred version of human moral history is deftly evoked in Szumigalski's account:

> . . .we have laid out for ourselves a garden full of birds and worms and creeping plants which promised on their seed packets to flower, we believed them and have been disappointed yet by faith we see buds as the angels who are god's pupils see us[11]

Crozier's "Angels of Snow" begins by acknowledging a difference between "our angels" and those of an implied other, in a pattern that may well owe its formulation to Margaret Atwood's "The Animals in That Country." "In this cold country/our angels are made of snow/and no one talks about them," Crozier writes. Like Atwood's animal eyes of "this country" that "flash once

in car headlights/and are gone,"[12] the "long hair" of Crozier's snow angels "sweeps across the car lights," leaving "the man" in a condition of speechless "enchantment." The woman who raises children, plants seeds, and carries water from the well, indicating her post-lapsarian condition of labour, has no difficulty discerning the presence of the angels, but will no more speak of them than her mate will. Perhaps the most radical replacing of the myth, however, comes in Crozier's account of the orientation of these cold beings. Unlike their archetypes, who point the way out of Eden to the fallen Adam and Eve, these snow angels are on the outside, looking in, though they remain threatening to the human community in the poem:

> Sometimes when the yardlight
> splits the darkness
> you see them outside the window,
> pressed against the frozen pane,
> wanting in.
>
> It is then you don't like to be alone.[13]

The replacing of the languages, forms, mythologies, and traditions of other places with those of this place, to which Dennis Cooley has called attention in his highly poetic introduction to *RePlacing*,[14] finds precise exemplification in much of Crozier's work. That she should see the poetic attempt to capture the essence of experience as a trapline ritual in a poem of that name, or that she should take as a figure for the brutalizing of a woman by a man, heavy boots cracking the surface of a frozen lake[15] is an indication of the way she sees out of this place, and that seeing is shaped by a language spoken here. This fact does not mean, however, that her vision or subject-matter is confined to this place. In her "Poem about Nothing," she blends, without any sense of strain whatsoever, classical and local images of despair, of disaster that could be indigenous, but could equally well be European:

> When you look up
> from the bottom of a dry well
> zero is what you see,
> the terrible blue of it.
>
> It is the rope
> you knot around your throat
> when your heels itch for wings.

Icarus understood zero
as he caught the smell
of burning feathers
and fell into the sea.

ø

If you roll zero down a hill
it will grow,
swallow the towns, the farms,
the people at their tables
playing tic-tac-toe.[16]

Cooley himself acknowledges the continuum of literary culture in his poem "Jan/us," but rupturing the word "Janus" encodes not only the conflict between the presumably male speaker of the poem and his female lover with whom he is distractedly angry, but also Cooley's own quarrel with the constructs of a parent culture. The title points to Jan as a woman's name, and invites the reader to see that she was once part of a larger entity, a part of "us"; but something, never verbally specified, has come between these once unified referents, and the space and slash that separate them on the page can be read as the space and time that alienate the speaker from the original construct. Janus was the Roman god of entrances and beginnings who, having two faces, could look both ways. On the domestic level the name thus refers to the fact that the speaker cannot keep his attention focussed on the book he is reading because of the anger with the woman who draws his attention elsewhere. On the metapoetic level, however, the name evokes a kind of love-hate relationship with an Old World cultural construct. The signs at the end of the poem point to a continued if painful cohabitation as Cooley again uses space as a way of creating meaning, suggesting the parallel, but not totally aligned, existences of the two by his references to vision in the phrases "your eyes" and "I see":

[I] undress quietly
in the cool
dark room
listen to your tense
too even breathing
in and out
beneath the light
down comforter

and in the
dark/your eyes/
I see
are glistening
wet.[17]

The tradition of plain-speaking has another dimension in the anecdotal and often conversational poems of many contemporary Saskatchewan writers, and Cooley has devoted much of his critical energy of late to opening up a space for such writers to be heard. In "The Vernacular Muse in Prairie Poetry"[18] he cogently reminds readers that critical judgements can be used to silence those of a different political position from that of the critic, but he avoids the crucial issue of what criteria a reader should use to judge the writing inspired by this vernacular muse, unless any one person who speaks with prairie accents is to be taken as seriously as any other. Cooley has preferred instead to discount the aesthetics of other readers, myself among them, as ideologically loaded, being either imperialistically or colonially generated. No doubt literary taste is not innocently constructed, and as teachers and writers both creative and critical we need to be wary of being literary neophobes, but if poetry is to speak to more than a local audience, it must do more than appropriate local idiom. There must be something arresting about the way writers handle language or form, something that reaches beyond place while acknowledging the ground it stands on, for me to feel their work is as valuable as that which has these qualities.

While I do not always find those qualities in the work of Andrew Suknaski, he is undoubtedly the most influential Saskatchewan writer in the vernacular mode, recurrently attempting to transcribe the way a variety of ethnic speakers use English. The kinds of voices Suknaski hears speaking to him from the prairies, and valorizes in his transcriptions, are of three general kinds. First there are the natural voices of the land itself. In "After a 'Prairie Boy's Summer,'" for example, he presents an autobiographical persona attending to these voices:

suknatskyj listens
to what the dry grass speaks
in the vernacular of wind
across prairie[19]

Secondly, he listens to the faint voices of the native peoples, lending his strength of articulation to help make them heard. The five tales of the *Octomi*[20] volume are uniformly of this type, but native voices are heard and native

mythologies used repeatedly in other poems as well. Suknaski allows Shugmanitou, the coyote who is the spirit of the land incarnate, to leave his tracks across many a poem, and snatches of Indian languages often occur in his proximity (see for example "Mashteeshka" in *Wood Mountain Poems*). But Suknaski's transcriptions of native peoples speaking in a non-standard English can be problematical in isolation because there is a danger of undermining the dignity of a character who speaks what most readers apprehend as broken English. In "Thickfoot," however, Suknaski teaches his readers how these poems should be read. He introduces the title character as a man who at first seems to acquiesce in the Christian missionary's proffered definition of Thickfoot as a great sinner (and perhaps the non-native reader's view of him as something of a buffoon, for the idiom is that of the early Hollywood Indian)—"oh yes missionary . . .me big sinner/me much sad"—but Suknaski introduces him in this way to set up Thickfoot's joke, and show him the superior wit:

> thickfoot grave and confessing
> "one time me and my people
> we fight sioux
> me have plenty bullet
> fight six men who no have more powder
> me weak in heart like woman . . . say
> *no good medicine kill men*
> *who no have powder*
> *and bullet*
> me kill only two
> let rest run away
> me could kill all . . . this big . . . sin
> missionary
> ole thickfoot should be forgive
> for big
> sin"[21]

The reason for this demonstration of native superiority goes beyond the promptings of a guilt-ridden white liberal conscience. The point is one about language. People's tendency to denigrate the intelligence or sophistication of a socially, economically, and politically disempowered person who does not speak the language as the empowered users of that language do, is a tendency that clearly leads to severe miscalculations about character.

The third set of voices to whom Suknaski lends ear, and then pen, are those of the non-native settlers of the prairies and their descendants, and in poems

where these voices speak, Suknaski is most successful as mythologizer. Though Jimmy Hoy's "*gee clyz/all time slem ting*" makes a comic opening to "Jimmy Hoy's Place," the reader is quickly directed to assume a sympathetic stance toward the café owner by Suknaski's rhetorical tactics in the lines that follow:

> *gee clyz*
> *all time slem ting* hoy would say
> when he got mad at some obnoxious drunk
> stirring hell in the cafe[22]

By revealing Hoy's imperfect command of English idiom and pronunciation, and referring to the drunk as obnoxious and his behaviour as "stirring hell," the poet invites the reader to see Jimmy as a man in an alien environment, unmercifully harried by his own patrons, who are more deeply rooted in this place.

Robert Currie, Gary Hyland, Don Kerr, and Glen Sorestad have also made their mark primarily in this conversational and anecdotal mode. Sometimes these poems can be like found poems in the oral dimension, a transcription of what it is like to listen to Saskatchewan. Currie's "Getting It On" transcribes a CKCB Moose Jaw disc jockey in full flood:

> This is Sam the Man Spenser again
> back for another 55 fantastic minutes
> While the news was on ladies and laddies
> I had one sick fella on the phone
> Wanted me to play that John R. Cash song
> How high's the water Momma?
> Five feet high and risin
> With the crest still to hit River Park
> we'll have none of that[23]

One of my favourite Saskatchewan found-sounds is Dennis Gruending's appropriately playful "chucker chatter":

> hudda buddy
> hudda buddy
> now you gonowyou go
> fireball fireball
> righthaner
> shoot to me buddy
> shoot to me buddy buddy
> . . . . . .

you'n me honey
all they is honey honey
all they is honey
buddy buddy
buddy buddy[24]

There is of course a point at which the reproduction of everyday sounds or the rehearsal of anecdotes becomes nothing more than mundane. In the context of found-sound, selection is all. John Hicks would phrase a similar thought in a parallel way, arguing that immersion, an outright bathing, in experience is all. In his sardonic poem "Review," he observes

I can't see your
kitchen sink as an oc-
casion. Get into it and
take a bath if you want to
impress *me*.

Nonetheless he concludes this poem with the paradoxical piece of advice to would-be poets "Listen/if you want to be heard."[25] That for Hicks this listening is the starting but not the finishing point needs, however, to be said. After that come the demands of craft, demands that he conveys with illustrative concreteness in "Q.E.D.":

The problem is to put silence into speech
without breaking it; to leave
on water the image of the face peering
over the stern.[26]

Another quality that Hicks insists upon, and that I believe is comprehended in Ed Dyck's broader polemical complaint in his introduction to *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing* that "Thought in poetry is an anathema in Saskatchewan,"[27] is that the poem must enlarge the reader's vision of the world, make available new modes of experience, of being, rather than simply reflect those already known. "A Room of Rectangles" is specifically addressed to visual artists, but the questions the poem puts have relevance for other kinds of artists too:

What I want to ask artists is
why fr es always? Is that all

there is? I'd like canvases to spill
out and away, take you
into the distance, show you
where else there is to go,
what else to see, wonder at,
bring you back refreshed.

. . . . . .

In a roomful of rectangles
irrelevant remarks multiply, glances
stop short of understanding.
Small wonder. Frames leap out,
seize hold of imaginations,
stuff them in, clamp lids
down, stifle the last breath
that might have whispered, *I see*.[28]

Undoubtedly there are both cadenced and vernacular writers who have insufficiently transgressed the confines of the local to reach into the imaginative distance of which Hicks speaks, but most writers in my experience are ambitious enough to want an audience beyond the confines of their province, and indeed their country. Such audiences have shown themselves attracted to the vitality of the various forms of West Indian, African, Australian, and Indian speech in the idiom of other contemporary literatures, so clearly it would be silly to recommend the abandonment of regional idiom. But such idiom in the work of a writer like the St. Lucia-born Derek Walcott coexists with other kinds of attractions, and I think Saskatchewan writers might well benefit by studying how other writers in the post-colonial Commonwealth have adapted English poetic idiom to their environments.

NOTES

1. Patrick Lane, "The Weight," in *Old Mother* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982), 70.
2. Ibid., 48.
3. Ibid., 58.
4. Ibid., 60.
5. See for example Dennis Cooley's introduction to *RePlacing* (Downsview: ECW Press, 1982), 17.
6. John Newlove, "The Pride," in *The Fat Man: Selected Poems 1962-1974* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), 68.
7. Newlove, "The Prairie," in *Fat Man*, 80.

8. Helen Hawley, *Grasshopper* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1984), 13.
9. Ibid., 11.
10. Anne Szumigalski, "A House with a Tower," in *Dogstones: Selected and New Poems* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1986), 35.
11. Szumigalski, "The Compassion," in *Dogstones*, 149.
12. Margaret Atwood, "The Animals in That Country," in *The Animals in That Country* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), 3.
13. Lorna Crozier, "Angels of Snow," in *The Garden Going on Without Us* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 14.
14. Cooley, *RePlacing*, 17.
15. Lorna Uher (Crozier), "The Trapline Ritual" and "I Am a Lake," in *Crow's Black Joy* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1978), 26, 9.
16. Crozier, "Poem About Nothing," in *Garden*, 15-16.
17. Dennis Cooley, "Jan/us," in *Leaving* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1980), 5.
18. Dennis Cooley, "The Vernacular Muse in Prairie Poetry," in *The Vernacular Muse* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988), 167-222.
19. Andrew Suknaski, "After 'A Prairie Boy's Summer'," in *In the Name of Narid* (Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 1981), 9.
20. Andrew Suknaski, *Octomi* (Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 1976).
21. Andrew Suknaski, "Thickfoot," in *Wood Mountain Poems* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976), 45-46.
22. Suknaski, "Jimmy Hoy's Place," in *Wood Mountain*, 28.
23. Robert Currie, "Getting It On," in *Number One Northern: Poetry from Saskatchewan*, ed. Robert Currie et al. (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1977), 79.
24. Dennis Gruending, "Chucker Chatter," in *Draft: An Anthology of Prairie Poetry*, ed. Dennis Cooley (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press; Downsview: ECW Press, 1981), 70-71.
25. John Hicks, "Review," in *Rootless Trees* (Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 1985), 86.
26. Hicks, "Q.E.D.," in *Trees*, 85.
27. E.F. Dyck, "Introduction," in *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing*, ed. E.F. Dyck (Regina: Saskatchewan Writers Guild, 1986), xx.
28. Hicks, "A Room Full of Rectangles," in *Trees*, 65.

Placing the Vernacular: The Eye and the Ear in Saskatchewan Poetry

DENNIS COOLEY

> In the end, we come to the point at which we realize that the quality of symbolic and conceptual thinking of which human beings are capable, and which is mediated by the frontal lobes which begin with little monkeys—that quality combines two extraordinary human gifts: the gift of the eye and the gift of the ear . . . We learn most about people through the ear. We learn most about nature through the eye.
>
> —J. Bronowski[1]

Since our appreciation of any writing depends on our sense of where it "fits," I propose here to explore a simple but useful distinction between two strains of prairie poetry.[2] The differences will not, of course, be absolute but they will be apparent. I am, as my title implies, proposing that we can divvy up most Saskatchewan poetry under two jurisdictions—the eye and the ear. What I mean by "ear" poetry would correspond roughly to "vernacular" and what I am thinking of as "eye" poetry would compare to work commonly put in opposition to "vernacular," namely work that respects some combination of imagist, metaphoric, or expressive precepts.

Before I get into this division, let me say what I do *not* mean by "ear" poetry. The term, as I am using it, does not mean that "eye" poets lack, as we say, "a good ear." They may or they may not, it all depends on their play of words, the facility with which they use rhyme or rhythm or other principles of sound. But when they do use rhyme, it is often inconspicuous, in free verse seldom anchoring lines by opening or closing them but distributed irregularly and lightly within the text: through assonance, consonance, alliteration, half-rhyme, visual rhyme; in short, within the phonetic resources of poetry as they have been developed and laid down in the twentieth century. By virtue of their wide practice such devices have been by now rendered familiar and therefore "natural." "Ear" poetry is no less concerned with sound but because it draws on speech it largely foregoes such nuance and instead abides by whatever sorts of rhymes—

alliteration, emphatic repetitions in morphology, and puns (homonyms)—situate themselves in spoken language where sheer speed will not allow us to lounge or languish, or find time to adjust the text in small measures to itself. It should be apparent that what is at issue here is *not* verbal or even prosodic skill. What I *am* saying is that poetry in Saskatchewan arguably is being written under two very different auspices, which it behooves us to recognize and to understand; and further, that "eye" poetry too readily enjoys, by way of its established and therefore lauded forms, some presumption of superiority.

At the risk of digression I want to make some pointed comments about that presumption. I am assuming here that ignorance is no virtue in these matters, and that to take a certain activity for granted can be downright authoritarian: my poems are natural, yours are artificial, my language natural as grasshoppers, yours phoney as a dictionary (or an academic's talk). Here is what Charles Bernstein has to say about this manoeuvre:

> What I want to call attention to is that there is no natural writing style; that the preference for its supposed manifestations is simply a preference for a particular look to poetry & often a particular vocabulary (usually perceived as personal themes); that this preference (essentially a procedural decision to work within a certain domain sanctified into a rite of poetry) actually obscures the understanding of the work which appears to be its honoured bases; & especially that the cant of "make it personal" & "let it flow" are avoidances—by mystification—of some very compelling problems that swirl around truthtelling, confession, bad faith, false self, authenticity, virtue, etc.[3]

We have the spectacle of literary Mounties who think their practice, recognizable as poetry, needs no defence, that others must face the hard-headedness of *their* questions, their unblinking capacity to search out fraud and incompetence and other criminal acts (theorizing, for example). I would suggest to you that this is a form of tyranny and the sooner we realize that honoured forms, like any other forms, wobble through history and nationality, the better off we all will be.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have shown how institutions get established and perpetuated. Once those formations have taken shape, they are then

> experienced as existing over and beyond the individuals who "happen to" embody them at the moment. In other words, the institutions are now experienced as possessing a reality of their own, a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact.

> As long as the nascent institutions are constructed and maintained only in the interaction of *A* and *B*, their objectivity remains tenuous, easily changeable, almost playful . . . [T]he routinized background of *A*'s and *B*'s activity remains fairly accessible to deliberate intervention by *A* and *B*. Although the routines, once established, carry with them a tendency to persist, the possibility of changing them or even abolishing them remains at hand in consciousness. *A* and *B* alone are responsible for having constructed this world. *A* and *B* remain capable of changing or abolishing it . . .They understand the world that they themselves have made [and can unmake]. All this changes in the process of transmission to the new generation. The objectivity of the institutional world "thickens" and "hardens," not only for the children, but (by a mirror effect) for the parents as well. The "There we go again" now becomes "This is how these things are done." A world so regarded attains a firmness in consciousness; it becomes real in an ever more massive way and it can no longer be changed so readily. For the children, especially in the early phase of their socialization into it, it becomes *the* world. For the parents, it loses its playful quality and becomes "serious." For the children, the parental world . . . [s]ince they had no part in shaping it . . . confronts them as a given reality. . . [4]

This is how these things are done, my people, as I myself have done them, for some time now. Natural as the grass that breathes. At hand, immutable as marble, self-evident. As a matter of course.

For those who want to examine some further basis for what I say here, I am drawing heavily on Walter J. Ong, whose writings have explored the impact of media on various periods of culture: oral, chirographic (writing or manuscript), typographic, and electronic culture. He further distinguishes between the orality we find early in any culture, naming that "primary orality," and the orality we develop in an electronic age which, though oral, is hugely shaped by textual awareness, calling that more recent orality "secondary orality."[5] My "ear" poetry would coincide fairly well with Ong's "secondary orality."

To return to my claim, then: in prairie poetry the (rhetorical) sense of place takes one of two major forms. The first is fairly traditional and centres on the eye. The second is more recent (in the history of poetry but less so in the history of prairie poetry) and centres on the ear. The first concentrates on landscape, the second on speech. If the one, as is often observed, uses anecdote, it is equally true to say the other depends on vignette. Here is an illustration of what I am calling "eye" poetry:

> start with
> the journey back
> the raw beginning

it is
not a remembered place
it is forgotten & imagined

my father's land
the green hills always
green
tall kauri/rainforest
mists fingering
through trees ghosts
tread softly
the archives of leafmold

my father's land
where sea is
the constant
tide
moving in & out of my ear
the trumpet shell echoing
the seagulls' cry
the drumming waves[6]

And here is an instance of my "ear" poetry:

Scrawny's got himself this nifty sorta knob dealie
ya clamp onto one sidea your steerin wheel
Gotta be onea the greatest gizmos invented
Imagine ya got your arm around some dame eh
ya just grabaholda this here doomajig
spin it around hard, lay it to the boards
and no trouble at all ya got yourself a doughnut
and the dame's smeared against ya real romantic like[7]

I will return to these two examples, but not before some general observations.

First, the poetry by eye. This poetry favours description, often of landscape, and it usually observes some correspondence between inside and outside. Often as not it takes its origins in Imagism and privileges vision. The poet, as observer, as person of the eye, looks out upon a world, usually but not necessarily "nature," to a significant degree detached from it, at least in any physical way. In many such poems, the poet observes some landscape at a middle distance, describes it in a few concrete details, and assumes that what is "out there" stands for what is "in here." Set apart from what she observes, uninvolved in it

other than in her capacity as isolated observer and respondent, unengaged in any dialogue, she looks out upon a world, sometimes as it exists in the mind's eye, a realm that is passive and like as not silent.

More centrally, the poet speaks in serious tones and serves as originator of meaning, as one who de-scribes the world in telling images, or who in-scribes herself in it as producer of tropes—generally a flourish of fresh metaphors. This means the poet centres the poem personally, gives rise to its perceptions or conceptions, and guarantees its meaning and significance. The claim here—and I am now getting to the centre of my thesis—extends Romantic theories of art. There are various ways of describing that aesthetic, but what I say will not surprise students of Romanticism or of the post-Romanticism which many believe has been with us ever since. "Eye" poems find their endorsement in the lyrical "I" which watches over them and in them. This "I" is for the most part contemplative, inward, emotive, sensitive, private. It is also understated. Because the speaker seeks to account for what she sees, she assumes her language largely to be referential, that is to embody, to body forth, to imitate, to show the world that is *there*. And because she operates in this economy, she migrates toward an Imagist or a referential sense of language. For such writers language ought to be brief, ought not to be verbose or prolix. The thinking is consistent: if you assume words only refer or at their best refer and convey information about something there, you will grow impatient with writing that seems to repeat itself, that seems to give us the same old information all over again. In a sense all poetry is repetitive, and these "eye" poems, too, are heavily so in their modulation of theme or metaphor or scene. They certainly are in their dense reflexivity. But in "ear" poetry there is a more obvious form of repetition.

I will be returning to more features of "eye" poetry, but first let us have a look at what characterizes "ear" poetry. Again, bear in mind that we are talking about differences in degree, and that we can find to some extent a few of these features in "eye" poetry. Still, we can discern important distinctions. For one thing, "ear" language tends to be anything but metaphoric, nuanced, or intricately cadenced. On the contrary, it is vernacular and, instead of speaking in soliloquy, it enacts roles, presents selves (plural rather than singular in its loyalties), rhetorically appeals to some audience, real or imagined. Imploring, scolding, teasing, begging, cajoling, exhorting, praying—it addresses someone and seeks to act on an audience. Another way of thinking about this point would be to contrast the "I" who speaks in the "eye" poem to the "I" who speaks in the "ear" poem. The "eye" "I" most often speaks to no one, to no one present

at least. The "ear" speaker actively solicits some "you," and is situated always in a social occasion. This speaker not only talks to someone, he often responds to someone, engages in dialogue. In short, "The rhetorical ["ear"] self is social and playful, founded in language, while the serious ["eye"] one is 'a central self, an irreducible identity'."[8]

In thinking about these definitions we can usefully call on Roman Jakobson's "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," where he sets up his "communications" model (I have slightly altered the terms for clarity):[9]

CONTEXT
(referential)

SENDER (emotive) — MESSAGE (poetic) — RECEIVER (pragmatic)

CONTACT
(phatic)

CODE
(metalingual)

A few words of explanation might help. Each of these elements represents only an emphasis or proportion in any verbal transaction. Jakobson stresses that all verbal acts partake of several, perhaps all, of these dimensions, but argues that we can fruitfully divide verbal acts according to their greatest or most prominent direction. But first, what do these words mean? The horizontal circuit should be plain enough: we have someone (this someone could be plural or even anonymous) who originates or sends the message (a problematic term for literary readers), a message itself (what we would mean by text), and someone (again who could be plural or unknown or even merely potential) who receives the message. The vertical terms in Jakobson's schema are a little stranger and could bear more explanation. The contact is some physical or practical instrument, some tool or mechanism of delivery—tape recorder, telephone, the human body (as in body language), book, voice. The context is what roughly we mean by "the world," all those things that literature putatively gestures toward, the real world and known world of human experience. Finally, the code refers

to the language or system of encoding at work—Morse code, aviation signals, the English language, whatever.

Each of these parts, when emphasized, represents a verbal act different enough in degree to be thought of as different in kind. When the sender, for instance, emphasizes her actions as originator, draws attention to herself as originating and sending—"wow," "gee," "whe-EW"—she displays what we can call an emotive or an ex-pressive act. When a verbal act draws attention to the very schema it uses—"A noun is . . . ," "Make sure you use a topic sentence . . ."—that is, when we use language to talk about language, we have a metalingual act. Hence when in literature an author speaks of making literature, we call this metaliterary—literature talking about literature. Language that emphasizes contact, Jakobson calls phatic. By this he means words that involve or seek contact between sender and receiver, no matter how incomplete, potential, desired, or unsatisfying the contact may be. Think of what we say when we are on the receiving end of a telephone call, especially when we are not doing much "sending": "uh-huh," "yup," "ok," "mnn-hmm," "right," "right," "I know," "sure," "hmm?" These are phatic utterances, meant to assure the sender, however faint-heartedly, that we are there. All words that point to something "out there" function to foreground the context and therefore to privilege referential use of the language, that is, language which conveys knowledge of something that apparently is prior and external to that language. As for the receiver, when he is especially recognized rhetorically—often in imperatives and interrogatives (Why don't you get me a beer? Make sure it's cold, eh.)—we have what, modifying Jakobson's vocabulary, we might call affective or pragmatic.

It is clear where we can locate "eye" and "ear" poetry in this model. In instances that develop an "I" who conceives and articulates the poem, we typically have expressive language. To the degree that those poems are descriptive (and as I have argued, they often are) we also get referential language. But in poetry that is not always the case. Think of colloquial poetry. In it language, even when it refers or expresses, points much more dramatically toward the receiver and in its pragmatic features radically reorients us away from the speaker or the poet, away too from a subject to which the text points, and directs us instead toward some auditor or auditors who are *actively* invited into a relationship. I say actively because in all poetry there is an implied relationship between speaker and reader. But in "ear" poetry, the language registers the overture in overt ways.

Let me put this in another way. In the meditative lyric the guiding pronoun is "I." Other pronouns do occur, of course, but they are seldom addressed *directly* by the speaker, and stand ordinarily at some remove from the "I," and in some position of dependence on the "I." This situation supposes, to pick up on claims John Stuart Mill has made, that the poet works in soliloquy and in an outpouring of emotion. Mill further proposes a separation of language into that which is eloquent and that which is poetic. You will see a close resemblance between his schema and mine, though we value them differently:

> Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling. But if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying . . . the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavouring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action.
>
> All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy . . . What we have said to ourselves, we may tell to others afterwards; what we have said or done in solitude, we may voluntarily reproduce when we know that other eyes are upon us. But no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself . . .
>
> Poetry, accordingly, is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation; eloquence, of intercourse with the world.[10]

It would be easy to trace in Mill the continuation of Romantic precepts that for a time ordained poets as fountains and trees, as volcanoes or lamps, and that outlawed another kind of rhetoric. In oral poetry (and we realize that it too, the poetry *itself*, is authored in solitude) the speaker behaves as if he seeks to be heard, as if he has someone beside him as he speaks and to whom he speaks, even as that audience remains in fact absent to the poet and to the reader. The rhetoric in such poems simulates public exchange. You can see how important this matter is: the one poet, in soliloquy, unengaged in a dialogic way, sings her sensitive impressions to herself—monologic; the other poet enters dialogue, acknowledges a social setting, toward which he is responsive or solicitous—dialogic.

The linguistic and literary consequences of assuming either stance can be enormous. The lyrical poet will be esteemed for her capacity to meditate, to describe, to invent, to nuance. She will proceed with a greater sense of ease and tranquillity. Alone and solemn with her inner thoughts, she can scan a landscape

to find some symbolic or telling correspondence between herself or, less often, between others and the world—usually in nature, not with people—that surrounds them. Hugely dependent upon the eye as source, she will typically locate herself *in* space and outside of time, in something like a suspended present. Since she is not entangled in dialogue, that is in speech, she inhabits a world that is remarkably silent, one in which because it is unhurried, unharried, she can take the time—this is her style, is requisite to her self—to find exquisite rhythms and unusual tropes. Above all, she centres the poem and finds value in an inwardness that is personal or even private. That inwardness, Walter J. Ong tells us, derives from a print-centred culture, one that, after centuries of typography, has led us to internalize its technology and to view language not as something which connects us orally as once it did in public performance or in give-and-take, but as something under whose provisions we withdraw to organize our words along a drastically different projection, one that stresses unique personal experience.

This view of the poet we can immediately recognize as Romantic or, as I prefer to call it, post-Romantic, and it finds one of its simplest and most memorable expressions in Mill's pronouncement I mentioned above: "Eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard." You will notice that that eloquence, which by definition sits in an actual voicing or an oral economy, curling in our ears, is here set aside, as though it had nothing to do with poetry. Poetry becomes the preserve of the contemplative, of the lone individual, silently writing out her reflections. Here is part of what Ong has to say about this view:

> The dictum . . . prescribes poetic results to be achieved not so much by the poet as in spite of him. The poet is to function by accident, by indirection. He sits outside society—talking to no one, singing only to the moon. His mission is fulfilled only in so far as the venturesome make their way a little toward his seclusion and install themselves as eavesdroppers at his essentially private soliloquies.[11]

Later in the same essay Ong argues that

> The erection of poetry into soliloquy . . . shows in subtle fashion what was happening to the concept of language when the old oral-aural world which had nourished rhetoric, basically an art of oral communication, was abandoned for a more exclusively visualist cosmology.[12]

Ong also shows how Mill comes to think of the poet as imbued with some constitutional difference, some mark that sets her off from the rest of the species,

such regard proving to be a variation on the poet-as-genius theory. And so we celebrate her innate superiority, her awareness, sensitivity, creativity. She is a real natural, a natural poet to whom vision comes fresh as rain or a well when it is clear. She is gifted, set apart, indelibly marked. In exotic forms, too extravagant for Canadians, she is inscrutable, freakish, tormented, crazed: sex-hound, drug-fiend, schizophrenic, necrophiliac. All those shibboleths of The Poet. Claims about the poet's apartness and superiority (not necessarily moral but perceptual, conceptual, or emotional superiority) can be linked to the privacy and the visionary basis of much poetry written to this day. In it the poet's eye—a *different* eye, a higher understanding—presides (again there are exceptions) over a spatialized, silenced, and therefore scarcely populated landscape. It generates out of those expectations which print culture has inscribed in us original ways of reading that world.

In these poems, written under the ordinance of post-Romanticism, we ordinarily expect the speaker of the poem and the author of the poem to be brought into identity, and to offer us therefore some expression that will be sincere or authentic. As reassurance, she will project or declare herself, and she will avoid as inappropriate exhibitions of linguistic play. She will do so in the name of all that is intended and all that is genuine in an enterprise jeopardized by the faked, the worked up, the disingenuous, and the clever. In so acting, she will complete an arc that began in the eighteenth century when, in order to distinguish their work and to assure its reliability (its match of inner and outer), poets started to jaywalk past bold rhetorical figures which were embarrassingly available to "great poets and orators, primitive societies, and common people alike."[13] In accordance with honest practice the poet usually will restrict herself to a limited range of recognized subjects, preferably love, death, art, and nature. Further, she will honour the lexical sets appropriate to her subjects. We expect the poet in her own voice to speak of intimate emotions, to do so in a suspended present, to identify with what she contemplates, and to seek enlarged perception, often as climax to the poem's structure. Normally she would address no audience overtly, speak briefly but poignantly (at the limits, pungently), adopt a slightly elevated voice and a more regular rhythm than we find in speech. More generally she might structure the brief utterance by some discernible pattern of increasing density that she would round off with a firm principle of closure.[14]

I would like to go on laying out these distinctions, but if I did I would end up ignoring specifics entirely. So, knowing that my remarks are sketchy, and my proportioning lumpy, let me pick up my examples of the audible and the visual.

You may have noticed that I have often spoken of the poet in the feminine when I have discussed "eye" poetry and in the masculine when I have mentioned "ear" poetry. There is good reason for this, aside from some gesture toward the politics of gender. It seems to me that what I am calling "eye" poems tend to be written by women, and "ear" poems to be written by men. It is here, as they are named, that a lot of writers get prickly. I would hazard two other generalizations: for obvious enough reasons vernacular writing often comes from younger writers and native-born writers, iconic work from older writers and immigrant writers. Think of a quick example: Anne Szumigalski as an eye poet, Andrew Suknaski as ear poet, though neither of course is restricted to writing in one style. We could with some thought fit any number of poets into these categories, and we could of course find those—Lorna Crozier comes to mind—who hang around both yards. We could also find some important exceptions, Pat Lane, say, who though male, native-born, and even relatively young, has through most of his career practised a poetry that is inward and elegantly cadenced. (I once told Lane he should spray his poems with anapesticide).

Having said that, I return to the two examples I quoted earlier. My example of "eye" poetry comes from a book full of references to landscapes, eyes, dreams, and a lone poet looking inward to her own resources. "Writing poetry," Elizabeth Allen has said, "is like having a confidant."[15] This poem, like so many others of its kind, closes upon itself, thickens with rhyme, and therefore proves to be internally motivated. The rhyme is light and dispersed in such a way it does not call attention to itself, yet it confirms the poem in its self-sufficiency and makes it appear completed, finished off, stable.

Written by someone who in the past was actively drawn to visual arts,[16] this is a poem confident in the page and indebted for its consciousness, which is to say its language, to the technology of writing and print. Look at the most obvious signs: the explicit reference to a book world (archives), the use of apostrophes and the use of the virgule (made available within the machinery of writing and of print respectively). More subtly, there are the hesitancies in the voice, set into the lines; "my father's land/where sea is/the constant/tide." This convention allows for nuance or, more precisely, delicacy of phrasing. No wonder. You don't have to raise your voice in print culture. The scrupulous pauses find their origin in a poetics of contemplation and their expressive form in words and lines distributed meaningfully on the *space* of the page, that is, within the technology of print culture, where the poet can open holes of silence in margins or within lines. This resource obviously is unavailable to a pre-

literate culture and proves to be of limited use to poems which largely observe oral conventions, among them loquacity: don't stop talking! Silence is an embarrassment for the orator. Impatient, rambunctious, he requires a barrage of sounds: don't give them an opening.

There are other rhetorical marks in our example of the iconic poem—absence for one thing, its concern for the unavailable and the lost in this (very common) version. The unseen, the hidden, the inscrutable. What is not available to the eye but soon becomes available, to the inward eye. Or to memory in its migration to a source with which this author keeps faith by bringing it forward. The verbs, too, delimit conventions of inwardness. By and large they are intransitive (in spirit if not always in grammar) or simply expressive of states or definitions: "it is," "it is," "hills [are] always," "sea is," "shell [is] echoing." The copula participates in tautology, it establishes things and affixes their properties. Even the two verbs—"start" and "tread" that seem to be active actually are not so: "start" refers to an inward action, the starting of a mental journey, and "tread" works metaphorically to express the poet's sense of a recovering in reverie. In de-scribing a relatively stable world the poet also uses present progressive tense—"is echoing," "is moving." (My argument simply strengthens, by the way, if we take the verbals, "echoing" and "moving," to be participles.) This form of the present, as opposed to simple present—echoes, moves—tends to minimize action by suggesting its suspension or its incompletion, with the consequence that the actions seem not to come with much force, seem to trail on indefinitely in some timeless present.

The audible poem, however, exists *in* time and it engages or seeks to engage some listener. It tends to be more boisterous, to ramble in loose episodic structure and in paratactic connections. Ordinarily it will use coordinate construction and normative syntax, and it will eschew the startling figure of speech. Less descriptive of setting, it will be more populated by people. So it will be less meditative and more social. It will more often use transitive verbs and action verbs and especially in its more vehement moments (our example) it will invest itself in imperatives and interrogatives (the most obvious signs, you will recall, of the pragmatic)—verbs that jostle their (would-be) recipients, that would bring them to life, into action. The "ear" poem trails quickly into the "phatic," longing for solidarity. The predicate as magic. More primitive. Less perspicacious, less judicious, this writing is never so sensitive or so serious as the "eye" poem. Or seemingly this is so, for I am arguing that poets who use vernacular

like as not turn out to be more parvenu than ingenu, are more likely to be upstarts than naifs.

The "ear" poem also tends not to carry much semantic weight, and—this is what scandalizes so many readers—hence not to convey much "significance" or "meaning." Upfront, it will not tantalize with hints of hidden importance. And so the cries of distress. You hear them among reviewers and among poets who play it safe and enforce given orthodoxies: this is trivial, childish, an invasion of truth, an evasion of responsibility, maturity. I take these complaints to be based in a literary Puritanism which refuses to be amused or gratified, or in some species of Victorian Idealism which assumes we should be reaching to Big Thoughts, preferably in realms of eternity where words slide silently by, restored to pristine immediacy, so lexically pure they have scraped away all bumps and knocks, the hiss and slurp we hear when words are dragged through the contamination of ideolect and animal throats. You hear it in reviewers' calls for wisdom or guidance above all else. In this reckoning the ear's flutter cannot compete with the semantics, these mantics, of eye; if we abide by conventional wisdom we must prefer logos to epos, thought to song, meaning to play.

My example of idiomatic, "ear" poetry is built on dramatic structure, with its sense of audience to whom the speaker addresses himself in an active way, in verbs of action, in simple present tense that points to accomplished actions. It draws unabashedly on idiom and a refreshing vocabulary of popular inventiveness ("knob dealie," "gizmos," "doomajig," "a doughnut"), it deliberately restricts and at the same time specializes its vocabulary, and it shows verbal redundancy ("this nifty sorta knob dealie"). You will also find that it prizes verbal speed to the point of fusing words ("Gotta," "grabaholda"), shows virtually no awareness of the poem as text—that is, as a shape laid out on a sheet of paper—and that the speech is loaded with the speaker's wholehearted commitment (recall the restraint of our eye poet) to his fantasy and his desire to win somebody over to his enthusiasms ("the nifty," "Gotta be onea the greatest gizmos invented," "ya just grabaholda," "no trouble at all," "real romantic like"), and that as a result it foregrounds the second person in contrast to the first person of the other poetry. Noisy, hyperbolic, additive. Male.

A new music muscles in. Semantically colourful, phonetically jumpy, madly eliding and compounding (collapsing several parts of speech into one word), the poem chews on its syllables, knots them up and squeezes them, thumbs its nose at decorum. By all odds entered in a manner that flagrantly displays itself—looket me, looket *me*—the poem shouts its transgressions: shrugs inside

orthography, trying to find its fit; skitters lexically ("this nifty sorta knob dealie"); beetles feverishly in search of some creature that evades its adequacy to name. Its lexical set—the car, the machine—ignores the expected vocabulary of love (nature, spirit, high art). But in its play it too nabs metaphor: "lay it to the boards" zaps us with anonymous and collective invention. Ludic, agonistic, irreverent, it dances with the snap of speech in the street. Rhetorical.

If we had world enough and time, I would venture some thoughts on where these practices might take us and what may be gained or lost in either formation. I will say now only that we can cultivate both of them, enjoy each for what it is. I would add that one of the most exciting forms prairie poetry recently has taken, and may continue to take, lies in a combination of these practices within a single text (not simply in the existence of them side by side in different writers or texts). Think of Birk Sproxton.[17] By drawing on the sort or nuance which we can generate in private lyric, and on the energy we can locate in the oral, we might well produce an even richer and fresher writing. Out of our place. Out of our minds. It will give us fits. It's being done. Already.

NOTES

1. J. Bronowski, *The Visionary Eye: Essays in the Arts, Literature, and Science*, ed. Piero E. Ariotti (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), 87.
2. I was startled when I presented this paper to find hostility toward my attempts at placing poems in some mode. The resistance seemed to be based in a belief that poems are simply acts of self-expression and that attempts to identify them by kind are mistaken or impossible. That premise was precisely, I was trying to show, what was getting in the way of fair and intelligent reading of poetry. "Clearly," I wanted to say, "attempts to see where things 'fit' do not fix them in boxes but free them from the containment of *one* box (self-expression and reference) into which they are otherwise and indiscriminately thrown." Without reflection and study we're almost certain to apply the most customary or most familiar terms as the measure of all poetry. "Poetry is not confined to an outpouring of personal experience," someone should have said, "or to a particular set of conventions—try reading Chaucer and Pope in the same way—but directed at every turn by the domain of poetry, and its shifts and lurches." None of the poets was well served by this resentment of criticism which, I am sad to say, on several occasions at the conference took the form of categorical dismissals of "the academics" and "the critics."

   Pamela Banting has written an incisive critique of unreflecting "eye" poets in which she shows how they often lock themselves into a narrow theory even as they dismiss others as mere theorists: "The (Eye) or (I) Y," *Prairie Fire* 8 (Summer 1987): 33-39.
3. Charles Bernstein, "Stray Straws and Straw Men," in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1986), 45.

4. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 76-77.
5. See for example the following books by Walter J. Ong: *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971); *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); and *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982). Richard A. Lanham has written a superb account of orality in *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
6. Elizabeth Allen, "transplant," in *A Shored Up House* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1980), 48.
7. Gary Hyland, "Power Steering," in *Just Off Main* (Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 1982), 48.
8. Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983), 108.
9. Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), 353-57.
10. John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 348-49.
11. Walter J. Ong, "J.S. Mill's Pariah Poet," in *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, 237-38.
12. Ibid., 254.
13. Peter Dixon, *Rhetoric* (London: Methuen, 1971), 42.
14. I have used Peter Lindley, *Lyric* (London: Methuen, 1985) as the basis for much of what I say here about lyric.
15. Doris Hillis, "Elizabeth Allen," in *Voices & Visions: Interviews with Saskatchewan Writers* (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1985), 154.
16. Ibid., 150.
17. Birk Sproxton, *Headframe* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1985).

Responding to the Critics

ROBERT CURRIE

Randall Jarrell once said that the problem for the poet in America is that nobody looks at him; then everyone claims that he's invisible. He added that many readers are like Mortimer Snerd pretending to be Dr. Johnson: the way they read is hardly to read poetry at all.[1] In Saskatchewan we have good readers, Cooley and Gingell included, and now we have an academic symposium to provide us with the official word on a literature that is still young, still flexing its muscles.

I prefer the response of James Dickey, who claims that "what poetry has to have is the *un*official response: the response which is crazy, outlandish [and] cannot be justified by any conceivable public accord."[2] Too often, the critic's response consists of generalizations, formulas to follow or frameworks within which to fit our poems.

I am reminded of John Frederick Nims answering a question at a writers' conference about how to become a poet. "It's easy," he said. "It's like teaching you to ride a bicycle across the Grand Canyon on a cable, balancing bowls on either end of a long pole. First, stretch a cable across the canyon. Get a bicycle which will roll on the cable. Balance the fishbowls on the pole and mount the bicycle, being careful not to spill the fish."[3] In other words, explanations can be easily made, but they are not much help to the poet. Most poets, in fact, resist explanations and generalizations. Hence, I would like to respond to some of the generalizations in the papers by Cooley and Gingell.

In the case of Dennis Cooley, my hackles were rising well before the end of his first sentence because of his assumption that "our appreciation of any writing depends on our sense of where it 'fits'." No. I do not think so. Our appreciation depends on whether a poem works; it depends on our sensation of something heard, seen and felt, an experience shared. Dylan Thomas put it this way: "All that matters about poetry is the enjoyment of it, however tragic it may be. All that matters is the eternal movement behind it, the vast undercurrent of human grief, folly, pretension, exaltation, or ignorance, however unlofty the intention of the poem . . . Poetry," he added, "is what makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle."[4]

Dennis Cooley describes two strains of prairie poetry: (1) "eye" poetry with its lyrical "I," its controlled nuance, its meditative, metaphoric language, its descriptive imagism; (2) "ear" poetry with its vernacular energy, its appeal to an audience, its sheer boisterous noise. Cooley suggests that poets must be aware of the enormous linguistic and literary consequences of assuming either stance. He implies that the best poems of the future will combine these modes, that our best poets will consciously draw on "the sort of nuance which we can generate in the private lyric, and on the energy we can locate in the oral." I think most Saskatchewan poets have been doing exactly that for years—at least unconsciously. Poetry, after all, is not a conscious charting of the rules. As long ago as 1981, Patrick Lane had already recognized a style of Saskatchewan poetry which he called a "mix of the lyric and narrative resulting in a kind of imagistic, anecdotal poetry."[5] Well, critical generalizations can be drawn about Saskatchewan poetry. Conclusions can be arrived at, discussed, argued about, but—in at least one sense—they do not matter. And that is in the sense that they do not matter to poets before or while they write their poems, for the best poems are unaffected by general rules, uninfluenced by manifestoes. Poetry begins somewhere else.

Thus, for Robert Frost, a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom."[6] He talks about the initial delight that comes from the surprise of remembering something that he did not know he knew. The best poems, then, take advantage of impulse and run a course of lucky events, developing by a revelation or a series of revelations—he meant revelations for the poet, not just the reader. Frost adds that a poem's most precious quality is "its having run itself and carried away the poet with it." Al Purdy makes much the same point. He says, "There ought to be a quality in a good poet beyond any analysis, the part of his mind that leaps from one point to another, sideways, backwards, ass-over-the-electric-kettle."[7] Purdy thinks that the demands of a poem "cause the mind to stretch, to do more than it is capable of under ordinary and different circumstances." Good poetry o'erleaps the theories about it—as I think Dennis Cooley's own poems have done.

Susan Gingell works from somewhat different assumptions than Dennis Cooley; she sees more forces at work in Saskatchewan poetry, draws more inferences from what she sees. Many writers will be interested in her assumption that a concern central to the development of Saskatchewan poetry involves "taking a language and a poetic tradition shaped by a geography, a history, and a culture so different from those of Saskatchewan and making it speak in an

authentic way of Saskatchewan experience." It is true, perhaps, that every poet ends his apprenticeship by finally taking the courageous leap from someone else's language to his own. Patrick Lane talks about how he was influenced by Canadian poets: "I was deeply moved by the work of Alden Nowlan, John Newlove and Milton Acorn. They were contemporaries and what they did was to show me that one could write out of the local and the regional—that my own people were a fit subject for poetry."[8] And Lorna Crozier says that her education began when she read Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*: "Oh my God, he's writing about *my* landscape. That was really important to me: that he should write about the wind, the dust, the false-fronted stores . . . It was the discovery of my own country."[9]

It was a discovery we all made—often with an intuitive flash of recognition that gave us a new freedom to write what we wanted to write with our own native language. It was an important discovery, but I do not believe that it involved a long or continuous struggle to shuck off a language, tradition, or culture foreign to us. Ed Dyck, at least, would object to that idea. In his introduction to *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing* he rejects the general belief that "one of the major hindrances to authentic prairie poetry is the disparity between imported ideas about poetry, about language, and home-grown experience." His point is that "such contradictions, disparities, call them what you will, are perhaps not hindrances to but sources of authentic poetry."[10] Lorna Crozier would seem to agree. In her introduction to *A Sudden Radiance*, the major anthology of Saskatchewan poets, she suggests that "these writers live among contradictions; they write out of a place where the descriptive words used by others frequently don't correspond to their own perceptions. That contrast produces a creative tension—a pull between what they're supposed to see and what they see, between what they're supposed to feel and what they feel, between what's been said and what they're trying to say. This series of contradictions has generated a kind of defiance—a need to set the record straight."[11] Her conclusions, we should note, are a direct result of a poet/editor reading everything by everyone of this province's established poets. She also says, "What these writers have in common is the geographic source of their images; what makes them good writers is their idiosyncratic use of these particulars of place."[12] The poet's emphasis, you will note, is on the specific, not the general.

Still, there is one generalization about prairie poetry that needs a response. Susan Gingell refers to the tradition of plain-speaking in the anecdotal and conversational poems of many contemporary Saskatchewan writers. Stephen

Scobie, in a patronizing review of a Glen Sorestad book, dismisses this tradition as a "minor mode (the infamous 'prairie anecdotal' school, which can be terminally boring)."[13] In fact, the so-called prairie anecdotalists are more energetic than boring, even their blandest poetry more entertaining than what my friend Gary Hyland calls "the complacent, convoluted crap, the anemic, allusive, anorexic pap of the academic poets."[14] Now that is not fair either, but it is fun saying it.

Still, there is a point that needs making. When Susan Gingell talks about conversational poems which *transcribe* the way people speak, about *found* poems in the oral dimension, about the *reproduction* of everyday sounds, I hope that it will not be inferred that there is no more than that to the conversational tradition of poetry. Art is selection. Writing what may seem to be a simple conversational poem requires honing and heightening. It is not an act of eavesdropping; it is an act of creation, of transformation. "Poetry," Mark Abley once said, "is always wider, deeper, richer than our analyses and definitions, and any attempt to divert its flow into convenient, 'correct' channels deserves to be resisted."[15]

Those Saskatchewan poets who have been categorized by the critics as working in the conversational, anecdotal mode resist that categorization. They say that such a category means next to nothing. Poems are not comparable; they are incomparably unique. They are not interchangeable pieces in some puzzling permutation of literary criticism. They are not written so that poets can be shuffled into common groups, classified in easy categories. Poems are individual. They must be read as such.

In the end, then, my response to the critics is a lot like that of Huckleberry Finn sticking up for Mark Twain's most famous novel in a John Seelye essay. Huck describes how "the liberrians didn't want no trouble, so they took [the book] off the shelves again. And the crickits was bothered by the book too. At first they agreed with the liberrians that the book was trash, but about the time the liberrians had got used to the trashiness, the crickits decided that the book warn't trashy enough." Finally, Huck writes his own version of the story because "Mark Twain's book is for children and such, whilst this one here is for crickits. And now that they've got *their* book, maybe they'll leave the other one alone."[16]

Well, there are critics and there are "crickits," but the crickets that speak with the most meaning to me are like the one in Anne Szumigalski's poem "Nettles":

One day they will find me dead
O dead dead
A stinking old bundle of
dead
and in my hand
a peeled wand
and in my ear a cricket sitting
telling me stories and predictions
and the time of night[17]

NOTES

1. Randall Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," in *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Vintage, 1955), 9, 11.
2. James Dickey, *Self-Interviews*, ed. Barbara and James Reiss (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 71.
3. John Frederick Nims, quoted in Judson Jerome, *The Poet and the Poem* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 1974), 3.
4. Dylan Thomas, "Notes on the Art of Poetry," in *20th Century Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Gary Geddes (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), 595.
5. Patrick Lane, "The Saskatchewan Presses," *Grain* 9 (November 1981): 54.
6. Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," in *20th Century Poetry and Poetics*, 566.
7. Alfred Purdy, "An Interview," in *20th Century Poetry and Poetics*, 566.
8. "Patrick Lane," in *Voices and Visions: Interviews with Saskatchewan Writers*, ed. Doris Hillis (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1985), 63.
9. "Lorna Crozier," in *Voices and Visions*, 100.
10. E.F. Dyck, "Introduction," in *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing*, ed. E.F. Dyck (Regina: Saskatchewan Writers Guild, 1986), xvii.
11. Lorna Crozier, "Introduction," in *A Sudden Radiance: Saskatchewan Poetry*, ed. Lorna Crozier and Gary Hyland (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1987), xx.
12. Ibid., xix.
13. Stephen Scobie, review of *Hold the Rain in Your Hands* by Glen Sorestad, *Malahat Review*, 73 (January 1986): 126.
14. Gary Hyland, in a speech to the Creative Writing 30 class at Central Collegiate, Moose Jaw, November 1986.
15. Mark Abley, "Laying Down the Law," *Grain* 8 (November 1980): 50.
16. John Seelye, "De Ole True Huck," introduction to *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), vi, xii.
17. Anne Szumigalski, "Nettles," in *Woman Reading in Bath* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1974), 82-83.

Fear of the Novel: The Linked Sequence of Short Stories in Saskatchewan Fiction

DAVID CARPENTER

The linked sequence of short stories is now becoming familiar to readers of Saskatchewan fiction. Structurally, it sits between two forms: the short story collection (of unconnected works) and the novel or novella (with its commitment to one main plot and the destiny of one or more main characters). James Joyce's *Dubliners* is a classic example of the first kind of book. The stories are connected by their setting, and perhaps by similarities of theme and execution, but Joyce had erased all connections between the characters before he published his stories as a collection. Closer to home, Lois Simmie's *Pictures* and Sinclair Ross's *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories* are examples of this sort of collection.

The best known examples of Saskatchewan fiction, more often than not, have been novels (*Who Has Seen the Wind*, *As For Me and My House*, *My Present Age*, and *Perdue*, for example). It is conceivable that certain segments of these prairie prototypes could be anthologized as short stories, but inconceivable that any such segments would gain in any way by being removed from the larger story they are part of.

To return to my original point, the linked sequence of short stories, structurally, falls somewhere between the traditional short story collection and the novel. William Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses* are two such sequences, as are Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and W.O. Mitchell's *Jake and the Kid*.

One of the things I can do in this brief statement is suggest a continuum to demonstrate the structural variety of this form we call the linked sequence. At the novelistic end of our continuum, and therefore just barely outside our frame of reference, would be Ven Begamudré's *Sacrifices*, an episodic novella. Indeed, one of its episodes was published as "Holiday Father" in the story anthology *Saskatchewan Gold*. Some of the chapters in this novel read like

individual stories but are enlisted by the main plot (the family odyssey) to move it forward. None of the chapters stands alone as satisfyingly as when all are read as stepping stones to a final conclusion.

At the other end of our continuum, the short story collection that begins to take on the shape of a linked sequence, and barely eligible for this discussion, is Guy Vanderhaeghe's *Man Descending*. Two pairs of stories are linked: "Drummer" and "Cages," by Billy Simpson and his family; and "Man Descending" and "Sam, Soren, and Ed," by the marriage of Ed and Victoria. The other eight stories are linked merely by similarities of theme and setting.

Man Descending does not derive its considerable strength from the linkage in the stories I have mentioned nearly so much as from the integrity of each story. I doubt if any anthologist would feel automatically compelled to publish "Sam, Soren, and Ed" if he had already chosen "Man Descending." Similarly, I doubt that any reader would suspect that "Drummer"—without "Cages"—is only half the story. "Drummer" explores Billy in love, and deriving from this, Billy wondering about Christian belief from the outside. "Cages" explores Billy in trouble. In the first story he is tempted toward fantasies of fratricide when he comes into conflict with his brother Gene; in the second story, he is ultimately compelled by conscience to become his brother's keeper (a hard thing to do when you're in jail). The stories are separate explorations of the same youth. Like the other two linked stories, they set up some interesting contrasts (Billy and Ed descend, both attempt to redeem themselves), but few readers would claim these four stories were somehow incomplete without their opposite number.

Some of the ecstatic reviewers of this prize-winning book implied that its strength lay in its variations upon the theme of man descending into hell. I have difficulty with this line of reasoning. It seems to imply that Vanderhaeghe was consciously forging parables around a preconceived theme. The considerable strength of this book, I repeat, derives from the integrity of the stories as individual utterances. Each story in this collection is its own centre of energy.

It follows, then, that Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams* is more central to our discussion. This linked sequence of stories tells of the old people of Pine Mountain Lodge. The stories are linked by the presence—in many cases, the perceptions—of Arla Pederson, the day nurse. A common view of these stories is to see them all as stages in Arla's voyage from denial to acceptance of death. But such a view, it seems to me, obscures a greater value of these stories: their capacity to involve us in the painful lives of the ladies of Pine Mountain Lodge.

Almost all of the stories move from Arla's personal preoccupations and observations, however naïve, selfish, or compassionate, to the gritty realities of old and dying people. This book is their story. Arla serves to make it so.

The book begins with this anonymous inscription:

> There is great beauty in old trees,
> old streets and ruins old:
> Why should not I as well as these
> Grow lovely growing old.[1]

Why not? Because the slow voyage to that final sleep at Pine Mountain Lodge is sordid, humiliating, painful, gutwrenchingly ugly. We follow Arla around from room to fetid room while she bathes the bodies of dying crones, cares for their festering wounds, changes their clothes when their bowels have gone on a rampage. The sight of blood, the smells of lysol and faeces, the smell of mortality, are everywhere in the rooms of the old ladies. And just as old Mrs. Bole, the artist in the first story "The Hoyer," leads Arla along a lurid path of horror stories (dismemberments, decapitations, and hangings), in order to give release to her own trapped fears and agonies; just as Miss Bole leads Arla through the Valley of the Shadow of Death to a more acute understanding of human suffering and its role in creativity; so Edna Alford leads us down a similar path to a gritty, fundamental awareness of human suffering.

> Why should not I as well as these
> Grow lovely growing old.

Who grows lovely drowning in their own sputum or moldering in their own faeces? Who can be seen as lovely under the sentence of slow death which is life at Pine Mountain Lodge? Tessie Bishop, for one, in "Half-Past Eight." And her friend Flora. They go out on the town, get drunk, and come home to the lodge bellowing a filthy song at the top of their lungs in defiance of the old ladies and matrons perhaps, but really in defiance of death. Mrs. Dawson grows beautiful as she waltzes with Arla to the tune of "The Tennessee Waltz."

This vision of loveliness, however fleeting, impresses me. In *A Sleep Full of Dreams* Alford wades through the horrors of old age, infirmity, loss, incontinency, senility, and death to salvage tiny dignities, hard won, by her chorus of dying crones, and thereby in a state of innocence. These tiny spiritual illuminations can light up only in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Night Games by Robert Currie is a twelve-part variation on the theme boy meets girl, although one of the stories, "From the Shadows," is more an example of girl meets boy. But they all focus on Steve Campbell who begins his terrifying quest for love in "Geranium!" In the midst of some boyhood shenanigans, he peeks through a neighbour's window at night and sees his friend Wall's Aunt Lil undressing. He creeps from her yard, Lil "inside his head now, fixed and real, going home with him, and suddenly he didn't want her there, not when he was alone in his room."[2]

Steve moves from boyhood to puberty in a state of furtive lust, yearning for and dreaming of the enticements he declines to accept. He almost has a teenage romance with Geraldine Radford. He almost has a fullblown love affair with Laura Randolf in "The White Dress." He almost connects at a party with a girl named Lia. But these girls persist in bursting his exalted ideal of them, becoming human, becoming carnal. Their passionate nature repels him, jars him into a realization of his own carnality, his own very real need for intimacy, and this he cannot accept. He says no to Eros.

Seven stories mark Steve's passage from boyhood to adultery, and then there are some big gaps. By the time we reach "From the Shadows," Steve is a mature and rather sensitive young man who can tell Lia (now married) that he had always meant to see her again. So at this point he can at least love in retrospect and confess his feelings. By the story "I know what I like," Steve is well into a rather tepid marriage with Nona, who like all the women he has loved, seems to have a lot of vitality and intelligence. In "A Little Protection," Steve and Nona have split up after fifteen years of marriage. And in "Possibilities," the last story of the book, Steve has put his bitterness and jealousy behind him, to some extent attained some perspective on his broken marriage, his fear of intimacy, and is ready in middle age to start over. He meets one of his lost opportunities, Geraldine Radford, now a widow, and the old dance is on.

The large gaps in time between the last few stories are instructive. The first half of the book reads somewhat like a novel because we are able to chart Steve's progress from year to year, watching his friends (as foils) grow along with him. But the last five pieces read more like stories than chapters in a novella because the major rites of passage are only alluded to and not met head on. Because the gaps are large, the reader to some extent is encouraged to fill them in. The sense of a story moving forward with the inexorable momentum of a novella is lost, and the reader focusses much more, I suspect, on each story as a centre of interest with its own particular identity. My feeling is that the last half of this book

(from "The White Dress" to "Possibilities") has more vitality than the first half; that Currie's reflections on Steve's adult life are more interesting and illuminating than his reflections on Steve's boyhood; that Currie's later work in this book is better than his early sketches; and that Currie's narrative talents show themselves to greater effect in a short story rhythm than in a novelistic rhythm.

What do I mean by short story or novelistic rhythms? For an answer I turn to the four fictions of Gertrude Story. Like Robert Currie, Edna Alford, and (in odd, errant moments) Guy Vanderhaeghe, Story is a published poet. Like all of them, she has had considerable success with the short story form. And like all of them, Story has something of the novelist in her. Two of her books, *The Way to Always Dance* and *The Need of Wanting Always*, are written with an eye to one main movement: Alvina Schroeder's voyage from innocence to wisdom. Each story in these two books reads like a chapter, taking the reader more or less forward in time: in *Always Dance*, from girlhood to womanhood; in *Wanting Always*, from womanhood to old age, death, and beyond. As I say, each story reads like a chapter in a novella. Put them both together, and they read something like a full-length novel, a *Bildungsroman* that explores Alvina's learning through sorrow.

But Story's reputation as a writer of short fiction surely comes primarily out of her other two books, *It Never Pays to Laugh Too Much*, Part II of the Alvina Schroeder trilogy, and *Black Swan*, the linked sequence of Gerda Beckmann stories. In these two books we read to a different rhythm—not to the forward flow of a linked sequence of events which fill in the details of a larger canvas, but to a deliberately interrupted rhythm in which each event is its own excuse for being.

A very interesting topic for future scholars of prairie fiction would be the four fictions of Gertrude Story. Is she strongest as a novelist or as a short story writer? Do her stories, regardless of length or rhythm, demonstrate more vitality in the mystical or in the realistic vein? Does her prose work more compellingly when it becomes poetic or when it is "flat and one-dimensional"?[3] I opt for the latter in all three cases, but I think my judgements are premature. Story is alive and well in Saskatchewan, and the more she threatens never to write another book, the more I suspect another swan is about to sing. And perhaps my three questions on the subject of Story's strengths are the wrong questions. But these questions are bound to lead to more substantial ones if the works of such an unusual writer are taken seriously by the academy.

To repeat myself, perhaps such tentative judgements about Story's writing—indeed, about Vanderhaeghe, Alford and Currie—are premature. These people are presumably all in mid-career, and all value judgements are subject at this point to endless qualifications and revisions.

I cannot help but feel that the gloves are not yet off, that the Saskatchewan writing community is very much a nurturing bed for the unfurling of future works, that we tend to suppress our doubts about our friends' artistic integrity, their place in the who's who of prairie literature. Genuinely, exultantly vicious criticism in the British tradition is considered bad manners in this brand new land where seldom is heard a discouraging word. And who needs it, unless of course, it is also intelligent criticism?

The title of this forum, "Fear of the Novel: The Linked Sequence of Short Stories in Saskatchewan Fiction," almost begs for value judgements. The title all but asks the question, isn't a linked sequence of short stories a cop-out, a failure of nerve, a sign for all readers to behold that the writer of these hybrids ran out of gas, conception, patience or courage, chose a compromise form for his or her first books? The answer to this unstated taunt is a qualified No. One might speculate that the linked sequence was Guy Vanderhaeghe's way of easing himself into the more complex form of the novel. One might speculate that had Edna Alford chosen the novel rather than the linked sequence form, she might have managed to explore Arla's life in greater detail, including her Saskatchewan past. But such speculations are a bit like judging Shakespeare's sonnets under the rubric of "Fear of the Epic." Had Vanderhaeghe chosen to write Billy's life or Ed's life first as novels, it is possible to assume that we would be without the text we know as *Man Descending*, the first work of Saskatchewan fiction to reach an international audience since Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* (1955), and the first work of Saskatchewan fiction ever to win a coveted international literary award (the Faber prize in England).

I have not discussed what makes these works particularly Saskatchewan by nature. Nor have I confessed my own personal fear of the novel as a form, the commitment such a monster demands from its creator. But I will conclude by urging readers of these linked sequences to read them without prejudice as to their form and structure if only to discover how novel these un-novels can be.

NOTES

1. Edna Alford, *A Sleep Full of Dreams* (Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1981), n.p.
2. Robert Currie, "Geranium!," in *Night Games* (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1983), 7.

3. David Arnason, "Leaving the Farm: Contemporary Saskatchewan Fiction," in *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing*, ed. E.F. Dyck (Regina: Saskatchewan Writers Guild, 1986), 118.

Fear of the Novel: The Linked Short Story in Saskatchewan Fiction

ANDREAS SCHROEDER

Before I begin to poke around this intriguing subject, I would like to set down the following caveat. I do not actually believe that the linked short story is a particularly prominent Saskatchewan phenomenon—certainly not, for example, to the extent that it seems to be in southern Ontario. However, there are instructive examples of it around—and besides, I happen to find the very provocativeness, even cheekiness, of the topic intriguing. It seems to be calling the writer of linked short fiction "chicken"—of not having the gumption to tackle the full-fledged job in a full-fledged way. Whoever formulated the topic probably expected to generate plenty of useful heat and light through its practitioners' offended denials of any such thing. However, as a writer of (among other things) linked short fiction, I have myself come to suspect that in too many cases there may be more than a grain of uncomfortable truth to the allegation.

Meanwhile, though I have suggested that the linked short story is not at the moment a prominent Saskatchewan literary phenomenon, this is not to say that it might not become so in the near future. Some of the fundamental prerequisites are definitely in place for it, primarily the fact that Saskatchewan short fiction is often based on the anecdotal. And the traditional frame-story, which encloses a gathering of often interrelated stories, is an historic bridge between the anecdote and the novel. Think of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Scheherazade's *Thousand and One Nights*, or more recently Irving's *Tale of a Traveller* or E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Tales of the Serapion Brethren*.

My interest in this topic will focus mainly on the practitioner's, rather than the literary critic's, point of view. That is both because my own firsthand knowledge comes from the poet's, or the short-story writer's approach to the novel (I have always suspected that the poem and the short story are more closely related than the short story and the novel), and because that is actually the perspective implied by our topic. If you are the only other kind of novelist there

is—one who dived straight in off the high board—you have obviously lost, or never had, a so-called "fear of the novel."

In my salad days as a young writer, I definitely would have rejected fear of any genre whatsoever as absolutely ridiculous. If I was having any problem at all, it was that I was not afraid of nearly enough; that was quite demonstrably getting me into plenty of trouble already. As for the novel, it was not fear of it that was the operative emotion. It was disdain. I wrote precise, very controlled, lyrical, tightly spring-loaded poetry and fiction. Not those giant, messy, wallowing slag-heaps of often irresponsibly arbitrary prose that seemed to me to characterize most novels. In my writing, every single word and diacritical mark was agonized over time and time again. Novelists, as far as I knew, just sort of mucked and slogged their way through. They were the only writers, besides journalists, who could get up every morning and write whether the Muse was on their side or not. They were like the necessary, but lowly, infantry. We, the poets and the short story writers, were the airmen of literature.

Ah well, I now write novels. And as I have banged my head and cracked my shins against the myriad problems of novel-writing, my respect for these infantrymen has risen steadily, and continues to do so. But my conversion did not happen overnight. I do not like to admit to my own philosophical slippages any more than the next hardheaded scribbler. So I worked my way novel-wards quite subconsciously, very slowly, carefully, suspiciously, from my origins as a lyric poet through prose poetry and parables, from experimental short stories into conventional short stories and novellas, from frame-stories into radio plays and micro-novels, and through micro-novels-that-refused-to-quit into docu-novels and full-length "fictional" novels. It has been, and continues to be, an adventure, a complicated, fascinating and often frustrating route that has its decided advantages as well as its costs. And in the process, I have changed my mind about a number of the traditional rules that might be said to govern writing.

An example. Call it Suspicion #1. When I was much younger I used to explain that whenever I encountered an idea, a scene, a character or a story that seemed to have literary potential, I would spend a good deal of time nosing around it, nudging it from all sides, watching and (more importantly) listening to it, waiting until it indicated to me what it wanted to be—a story, a poem, a radio play, a parable, or whatever. The corollary here was that the idea itself determined its form—and my writer's involvement at that point was merely to make sure I understood its formal demands correctly. That sounded pretty good, but much later, with the benefit of hindsight, I began to wonder why none of my ideas ever

seemed to want to be anything but the forms I was already inclined to write in at the time. The everyday percentages of Just Plain Chance would have dictated, surely, that I would have happened across an idea which demanded to be a novel—why was it that none of my ideas ever did? Had I simply not been listening carefully enough? Or had I been afraid to listen carefully enough?

Suspicion #2. Not too long after I found I had decided to be a full-time writer, both the requirements of the University of British Columbia Creative Writing Department and my own curiosity nudged me into a lot of different genres more or less simultaneously. These included journalism, which I wrote to put myself through university and another decade's worth of travel and other tomfoolery following graduation. In those days, during the late sixties and early seventies, the standard article length for national magazines was six thousand words. But as the seventies declined, the editors of these magazines decided the public was finding six thousand words on any topic too taxing, and began melting down the length. When this orgy with blowtorch and bunsen burner ended, the Second Coming of Christ wouldn't have rated more than three thousand words in the *Canadian Magazine*.

We oldtimers were in an uproar. It was ridiculous, we said. You could not achieve any sort of subject depth with three thousand words; this constituted a willful and self-fulfilling diminuition of the public's attention span and therefore its grasp of The Truth. I refused to set myself such limits out of hand. I wrote my articles to whatever length they seemed to need in order for the subject to have been given its due, then grudgingly edited down toward the three thousand-word length, kicking and fighting with my editor all the way. But meanwhile, back in my brain, an insidious thing was taking place. As I wrote more and more of these offensive three thousand-word articles, I began to find that, somehow, the point at which I was convinced I had dealt with the subject adequately and usefully, the point at which I had nothing more of any great import to say—that point, somehow, tended increasingly to coincide with an article length of three thousand words.

Now I suppose one could say that the above proves merely that we all have—or at least I have—a healthy capacity for being corrupted. But for the purposes of our topic I suggest that there was more going on. For me, at least, it was yet another indication (which, again, became clearer only with hindsight) that even those extraordinarily important definitions by which we describe our writing lives, over which we agonize and argue as intensely as if they were religions (which of course they are), by which we identify ourselves and make ourselves

distinctive from others—even those definitions, hardened into absolutes by endless repetition, constant rededication, and pontification, are not as absolute as we often feel we must believe them to be. Despite all our protestations, they can be soft inside, can be negotiable. In fact, they are often nothing more than our personal prejudices or convictions of an earlier time, polished to an adamant gloss by mere obstinance.

In short, I probably *was* sublimating my fear of the huge challenge that writing a novel with a poet's or short-story writer's painstaking approach entailed—by making a sort of political platform out of it.

This brings me to the subject of inner strength—courage. Of all the aspects of writing which the World Out There seems to misunderstand, the one it seems to have the least inkling about, is the monumental amount of inner strength that writing requires of a writer. As everyone who has coached young writers can corroborate, it is rarely a lack of talent that undermines such hopefuls; it is a lack of inner strength, of determination. That does not cease to be true for veteran writers. The ills and evils of the world prowl around our doorsteps every day of our lives. When we manage to overcome them or sidestep them, to accomplish what we must accomplish, it is never because the world has momentarily become a better place or human beings a better people. It is because we found the inner strength to face them, the courage not to be overcome by them. I remember the wag who said of the 1930s Depression, or the convulsive 1970s Inflation, as financial experts of all kinds agonized over this solution or that solution: "They're all on the wrong track. There is no mathematical solution to these problems. The real solution is simply to announce that there's no problem—and then get people to believe you." What sounded to me at the time a facile and flippant remark has over the years struck me as increasingly profound. In the area of writing, at least, it seems to me entirely appropriate.

These days I no longer believe that a tale, an idea, a character or whatever, *wants* to become the substance of any particular genre. From my own experience I have come to the conclusion that such ideas could go in any direction—that every character or story idea has the potential for all genres in it. It just depends on what the writer allows his subconscious to make of it or to find in it. And so I have come to realize that when a poet or a short story writer actually allows himself to intuit the "novel potential" of a given story or idea, especially when he can (by natural inclination) simultaneously see its equally vivid potential for short fiction or a poem, it does take one hell of a lot of courage to go for the novel in it.

Because writing a novel does take an awful lot of nerve. It is an extraordinary gamble. Whereas with a poem or a short story you can always keep that all-important overview, which tells you with reasonable certainty whether the undertaking is working, whether you are on the right track, whether it is coming together, a novel gives you none of those certainties. Within several chapters you are in it so deeply, it is almost impossible to tell whether you are still going where you thought you were going, or should have been going, and if you are not, whether this alternative is a workable alternative. I have got dozens of letters from novelists who happened, at the time of writing, to be in the middle of novels, and they all bay at the moon in an agony of uncertainty and frustration. One of the hardest things in the world is to pour years of your life's blood into something you have absolutely no guarantee will turn out to be publishable in the end. You develop obsessive urges to abandon your typewriter and go into building doghouses. You become jealous of meter-maids. Planting canola on your father-in-law's sixteen sections in the Great Sand Hills north of Maple Creek becomes an interesting proposition once more. So it is certainly not surprising if that managerial part of your brain with the duty to keep your life on a relatively even keel votes both subliminally and consciously against undertaking the writing of a novel.

On the face of it, and from the perspective of a poet or short-story writer, linked short fiction would seem to be an ideal solution for any story idea apparently requiring more range than that of a single short story. The writer's reach need not exceed his grasp. He can use all of his short story writing abilities while nevertheless creating a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts. And in the process, he can increase his intuitive range, get used to thinking in whole-novel terms. Meanwhile, the audience loses nothing by such on-the-job training.

And that is definitely true in all cases where the shoe clearly fits. Where a number of truly individual short stories can be found within a given framework; where the story of a community, for example, does not seem to warrant or fit a novel, but where individual stories about its individual inhabitants can both stand alone and simultaneously serve a larger function. The word "simultaneously" is critical here. Because linked stories are nevertheless nothing but individual stories that happen to have certain characters or settings in common, and the bottom line requirement remains their ability to be read, appreciated and published on their own. The linkage cannot be guaranteed, and therefore cannot, or should not be, counted on for any assistance. This brings us to the litmus test, the indicator for whether these stories actually stem from a

courage-sapping "fear of the novel," or from an author's reasoned doubts and suspicions about the aptness of a conventional novel treatment of his material.

In my experience, any fear of a literary form, if it implies that the author recognizes or accepts its aptness for his material but decides not to take up the challenge, will probably get him into trouble. Like any error in literary judgement, the resulting work will probably suffer for it. On the other hand, a healthy suspicion of a genre, adding a shrewd appreciation of its limitations and weaknesses to its advantages and strengths, generally improves rather than weakens the odds.

I get the impression, for example, that the linked elements in Gertrude Story's stories are merely a by-product of the fact that she writes short stories drawn from the seemingly inexhaustible canvas of her real or fictional background—a background with too many dramatic centres, too kaleidoscopic, for a novel treatment. It is not my business to judge whether she is correct in this, but the result works well, and I have never doubted her decision. The stories in *It Never Pays to Laugh Too Much*, for example, stand entirely on their own. They could be mixed and matched any way at all and you could still read the book cover to cover without feeling you had missed something. And by the end of the book you do have the feeling that the shoe fits perfectly—that you have ended up with an effect larger than the sum of its parts, a collection with the breadth and scope of a novel, but with all the benefits of good short fiction as well.

Another example might be Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams*. Here, too, the stories, though individually titled, are linked by involving, in one way or another, the various residents of a senior citizens' home. They stand alone, and are definitely individually publishable—five of them were, in fact, before the book appeared. But in *A Sleep Full of Dreams* we do begin to run into elements that nibble at the ideal independence of linked short fictions. There is not, for example, quite the same degree of interchangeability as there is in Gertrude Story's collection. Story's main character, a twelve-year-old girl named Alvena, does not change in drastic ways from story to story. She does learn something new in each story, but each event is not dependent on a previous event. In Alford's stories, that is not entirely true. Her main character Arla grows enough that the last story, at least, could not comfortably be located anywhere else. Furthermore, some of the stories actually name the nursing home, others do not. It is not critical to the independence of the stories, but it's a small sign that maybe, at some early stage, this collection *was* intended to be a novel, and then Alford changed her mind. Other tiny indicators are a throwaway reference

in the story entitled "Poll 101" to an incident with a machine which occurred in the collection's first story, entitled "The Hoyer," and the developing relationship between Arla and her lover David, which definitely progresses as the collection proceeds, and would, very strictly speaking, further limit the interchangeability of the stories. Mind you, the second-last story, "Under the I," which abruptly brings in two new characters who never appear again in any other story, pushes one's suspicion in the opposite direction. But I have no idea when "Under the I" was written in relation to the rest of the collection.

What remains true, and what allows this collection to work quite successfully despite the slight muddying factors described above, is that each story has a clearly independent dramatic mainspring, and its own strong ending. For my money, that is a very basic requirement for linked short stories. Otherwise, you might as well just call them chapters and be done with it. In deciding on the efficacy of linked short fiction, you have surely got to ask yourself: What is the point? What is the advantage in stringing stories together, rather than integrating everything into one many-branched whole? The answer must be that you do not want to lose the advantages of a short story, the (usually) stronger dramatic foci, the more powerful endings, the greater flexibility in time shifts and consistency requirements. If you are not really going after those advantages, or making use of them, I would worry about the decision to use this approach in the first place.

That is what makes me just a little uneasy about Robert Currie's *Night Games*, which, for all its short-story-collection accoutrements, still somehow feels to me like a novel that did not quite happen. The individual stories are somehow "softer" than they should be; they feel as if they are segmented parts of a much longer story which has been reparcelled into shorter pieces. This is not to say that I did not find the book very enjoyable. It is hilarious, gentle, woeful and sentimental in the way that hindsight always makes adolescence seem. But I do find myself inclined to debate the technical decisions that appear to underlie it. It feels betwixt and between; it does not, as a result, really benefit from either a novel's strengths or a short story's strengths. With my critic's hat on, and a critic's callous disregard for a writer's everyday woes and troubles, I would suggest it should have been written as a novel, with Steve Campbell as central character, and the book restricted to a representative year or two of Campbell's life. Tearing off my critic's hat and knowing how easy it is to airily suggest solutions the writer undoubtedly considered and rejected for reasons to which I have no access, I can appreciate that the solution may not be, or have felt, that simple.

In any case, those seemed to me to be three books which rather neatly exemplify the problems, challenges, advantages and disadvantages of linked short fiction as a literary form. It is a dangerous form, because writers tend most often to use it for its band-aid attributes, to make a virtue of a problem. Few writers, it seems, actually set out to write linked story collections. But when the form is used with care and without compromise, it can yield very powerful results. It would be intriguing, and a kind of triumph, if Saskatchewan writers added the fostering and development of this form to the various other innovations and pioneering enterprises for which they are already justly celebrated.

Poetic Desire and Authentic Rendering: Linked Collections

GUY VANDERHAEGHE

What Andreas Schroeder's paper demonstrates, if we accept a definition of the linked short story which regards the autonomy of the individual story as paramount, is that Saskatchewan writers have produced few pure examples of the type. For example, in both Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams* and Robert Currie's *Night Games* he detects qualities usually associated with the novel.

Only Gertrude Story's *It Never Pays to Laugh Too Much* appears to pass muster, conforming to the definition of the linked short story collection he proposes: that each story be capable of standing on its own and that the stories may be arranged in any order without markedly diminishing their effect. While this is true of *It Never Pays To Laugh Too Much* it is only true if the book is viewed in isolation. If, however, it is treated as part of a larger sequence of linked short stories which includes *The Way To Always Dance* and *The Need of Wanting Always* the interdependence of books and stories is evident. The last volume of this trilogy, *The Need of Wanting Always*, in particular relies on what we have learned of the passionate history of Alvena Schroeder in the first two books. It is no exaggeration to say that without such knowledge much of *The Need of Wanting Always* would prove inexplicable and bewildering to the reader. To an even greater degree than Alford's and Currie's work, Story's work is weakened if looked at piecemeal rather than judged as a whole.

If this is the case, what are these books we are scrutinizing, linked short story collections, or novels? Neither, I would say. What we have are interesting compromises—prose fictions in which traditional distinctions between short story and novel have been blurred by mingling elements of both.

The way in which our topic is posed assumes that linked short story collections, or novels, are clearly defined and mutually exclusive entities. I am not so sure that this is true, but for the sake of discussion I accept it as a given, as I gratefully accept Andreas Schroeder's definition of linked short story collections.

Such acceptance presents a problem. What are we to make of the strange

mixing of characteristics usually attributed to one genre or the other? Does it indicate a failure of craft, a confusion of goals on the part of the writers?

I have a hunch that there is another explanation, an explanation rooted in the sensibility I believe all three writers share and the demands placed on Saskatchewan writers by our literary history or, rather, lack of it. This hunch had its genesis in remarks made by Andreas Schroeder and David Carpenter. In his paper Schroeder comments that the short story is more closely related to the poem than the novel and Carpenter points out that Alford, Currie, and Story are all published poets. Here, I feel, are clues to better understanding their work.

Ever since James Joyce enunciated his doctrine of the epiphany, that moment when a sudden insight bursts upon the reader with all the force of revelation, short story writers have tended to be more lyrical, more "poetic," more intent on compassing meaning in a single scene, gesture, or dialogue which is a distillation of the essence of the story. In contrast to this approach, the novel has seldom illuminated with this sort of brief, intense light. The light the novel sheds grows slowly more powerful as the author builds incident upon telling incident, detail upon telling detail. Accumulation, rather than distillation, is the operative principle in the novel. It is this which lends so many novels their documentary quality: reliance on details necessitating a scrupulous record of the material world.

I would argue that the sensibilities of Alford, Currie, and Story are chiefly poetic and not novelistic. Their inclination is to illuminate their material in a flash of white hot light. In Gertrude Story's "The Whitest of Feathers," David's character is forever etched in the reader's mind the moment he appears at the dance, the white feather of shame set defiantly and flamboyantly in his black hat. *A Sleep Full of Dreams* is studded with similar powerful and moving epiphanies: Arla dancing with Mrs. Dawson; Arla weeping in the story "Communion," her body lying cruciform on her bed. And Steve Campbell in Currie's "The Trouble With Sex" rises up in the murky waters of the river to see a fish flash white above him, "Like a bare arm waving in the dark."[1]

Yet if the work of these three writers is energized by such evocative images, rich in poetic feeling, why do their books also so often have the feel of novels? My guess is that these three writers, like many Saskatchewan writers, feel compelled to perform the duties of an archivist. The claim is often made that much of the writing in Saskatchewan is anecdotal. Perhaps this is so because writers here, whether short story writers, poets, or novelists, realize that so much of what we have been and are has not been preserved and is escaping us. The anec-

dotal, the unwritten, needs to be written before it disappears. Maybe we sense the obligation to map the world of German Lutherans, to describe the Moose Jaw of the forties and the fifties, to draw our aged pioneers as they really are before they are lost sight of in clouds of myth. To do justice to these people and places, to make an honest and more complete record, writers may be fated to adopt and adapt novelistic strategies, strategies that seem more suited to the job of documentation.

The war which I have postulated between poetic inclination and the desire for an authentic rendering has, I think, led to a fertile creative tension. A tension which has produced works more various and more individual than if they had been straight-jacketed into a strict adherence to one or the other form, works ranging from Gertrude Story's vital and turbulent passion play, through Robert Currie's quiet pilgrim's progress towards love, and on to Edna Alford's series of haunting and resonant portraits of old age.

In the end, of course, it does not matter what I, or anyone else, calls these books. Writing is not judged on the basis of how easily it fits a pigeon-hole designed by somebody else. What matters is how it passes that simplest of tests, the test of reading. I do not know what might have been lost or gained if these were more conventional, more easily categorized books. But I, for one, would not run the risk of changing them. I am grateful for them as they are.

NOTES

1. Robert Currie, "The Trouble With Sex," in *Night Games* (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1983), 14.

Fear of the Novel

EDNA ALFORD

My response to the papers by Andreas Schroeder and David Carpenter takes a confessional rather than an academic form. While preparing the response, other possible titles came to mind since there appeared to be some confusion in arriving at a definite title from the outset; it fluctuated from "Fear of the Novel—Saskatchewan Short Fiction" to "Fear of the Novel—The Linked Short Story in Saskatchewan Fiction" and back a number of times. Schroeder and Carpenter have selected the latter title for their scrutiny. To add to the confusion, I would like to propose two more: "Fear of the Apple—The Orange in Saskatchewan Fiction" and/or "The Chicken Comes Home to Roost."

Although I cannot speak for Gertrude Story, Guy Vanderhaeghe, or Robert Currie, I would like to express my great relief that we have, as a group, been granted a stay of execution, if not a full pardon. For there were only four of us apprehended, "the gang of four," as it were. Given the first title, "Fear of the Novel—Saskatchewan Short Fiction," I assumed we would be dealing with all Saskatchewan short fiction. In conjunction with the phrase "Fear of the Novel," I was immediately confronted with the troubling thought that Saskatchewan short fiction writers just might be more "fearful" than all other fiction writers in all other languages, that the problem identified might be specific to this geographic region, that we may, by some mysterious collusion of physical and aesthetic forces, be more susceptible to this paranoia, have a predisposition toward it and, furthermore, that there was some hard evidence, recently discovered, which would corroborate this theory. When the title changed to "Fear of the Novel—The *Linked* Short Story in Saskatchewan Fiction," I realized that the identified infection seemed to be restricted only to those writers who worked with linked form, that is only the apprehended four, and I was relieved. My reaction was, "Thank heaven we caught it in time, before it spread any further."

Relief, however, was brief, and was replaced with the thought that troubled me most: both titles seemed to reflect an attitude toward short fiction I had come across before in my travels, an attitude sometimes overtly, sometimes secretly

held by writers and readers not only in Saskatchewan, but elsewhere, and even by certain practitioners of the form themselves. "The *airmen* of literature" indeed; I rather like the phrase applied to short fiction writers, although, naturally, it would need slight modification in order to be applicable to me. Still, suspicion (a frequent corollary of paranoia) persisted that the short fiction form, whether on its own or clustered or in linked form was, in some quarters, considered inferior to certain other fictional forms, specifically, the novel. In other words, that we might have a subtext which to me indicated the presence of a hierarchy of literary form, over and above the literary value of the individual work. One might logically ask, then, where other literary forms would fall within this hierarchy. Poetry, for example. Might we deduce that the writing of poetry in the province and elsewhere is the manifest fear of short fiction which in turn is practised, in the main, to stave off the even greater fear of the novel? Or, restricted to the poetic arena, is the lyric merely a fright/flight response to the terrifying prospect of the long poem? David Carpenter has demonstrated the silliness of this sort of reasoning in his paper with his reference to Shakespeare's sonnets.

Andreas Schroeder has articulated many of my concerns in his candid analysis of his own experience as a writer wrestling with form, the process of coming to terms with his assumptions, pre- and misconceptions, "the clauses in the 'constitution' that might be said to govern writing." He has arrived at certain conclusions I am able to support wholeheartedly, particularly his respect for all forms of writing and an openness to the uncharted possibilities of the linked form of short fiction.

I agree with both Schroeder's and Carpenter's impression that there is validity in the variations of linkage they have perceived in the work of the apprehended four: the linked form in the single collection (Alford); multiple linked collections (Story); linkage which both functions within a group of otherwise unconnected stories as well as generating other forms, i.e. toward the novel (Vanderhaeghe); and linkage which may move the writer away from the longer forms, toward the advantages inherent in the compressed short fiction form (Currie). As well, I am impressed with Carpenter's concept of a "continuum" to demonstrate the structural variety of the linked form; this concept indicates an open system and, again, a respect for the form itself and the possibilities suggested by the variation in the process of linkage.

Short fiction seems to me to function more by means of an associative implosion than by associative explosion, which is more characteristic of the

novella and the novel. In this regard, I agree with Andreas Schroeder that short fiction is very closely affiliated with poetry. He has observed, as well, that none of the forms we are discussing is new, but perhaps the way we regard them will in time change to reflect an appropriate respect for the changing nature and capabilities of each.

I want to respond directly to what both Schroeder and Carpenter have described as the insinuation in the topic assigned: the cowardice of the writer of linked short fiction. At first, my response to this was, in the words of Rudy Wiebe, "Where is this voice coming from?" Then, "Why?" Then, dismissing both as finally irrelevant to the matter at hand, I took as my model none other than Andreas Schroeder, co-conspirator with the disembodied voice *and* linked short story writers. Look back, Edna, I said, and reassess the process of arriving at the linked form for *A Sleep Full of Dreams*. Be ruthless, be uncompromising, and above all, be brave. It is now possible to confess the stirring of a faint hope for reprieve, if not redemption. And yes, the presence of fear.

The problem with affect/emotion—fear or any other— is that it cannot be measured empirically, capricious creatures that we humans are. So I was relieved that neither Andreas Schroeder or David Carpenter presumed to speak for Gertrude Story, Guy Vanderhaeghe, Robert Currie, or me in this regard. In fact, both Schroeder and Carpenter were humane and almost painfully tentative. I, however, have access to the interior of at least one of the apprehended four and will do what I can to ferret out the alleged fear of the novel which presented itself, apparently, in the form of a collection of linked short stories.

Upon further interrogation, Alford broke down, her arms flailing, her head twisting from side to side, her face contorted. Obvious discomfort. But could we call it fear? "Yes, yes," she cried. "Of course I fear the novel. The trouble is I fear short fiction too, linked or otherwise. And poetry. I'm terrified of poems. It's because I'm afraid of *words*."

"You admit that you spent three to five years writing your first collection of stories—a linked collection?"

"Yes. More. And on the second collection as well."

"Perhaps you were just very slow. Were you aware that you could have spent that time writing novels?"

"Some publishers, if you really want to know, advised me to convert *A Sleep Full of Dreams* into novel form."

"Aha! Then you admit you were aware of the potential for a novel in the linked short fiction manuscript of *A Sleep Full of Dreams?*"

"Yes."

"Then what could possibly motivate you to select the linked short fiction form over the novel?"

"Three reasons: one, I felt the stories had presented themselves in their natural form, the form most suited to the material; two, a subliminal fate, if you will; and three, love."

"You then persist in your belief that *A Sleep Full of Dreams* was conceived in the form of linked short fiction?"

"Yes. I was there. I even have a witness. I can provide you with name, telephone number and address of said witness if you need corroboration. One evening in #36 Meadow Court Apartments on Spruce Drive in Calgary, Alberta, I picked up a pen and wrote the title of what I had thought would be one short story. The title was 'Fall Cleaning.' Within less than half an hour, really closer to fifteen minutes, I had written ten titles. Some of the titles were later altered but the core of the stories themselves were those which appeared in the published collection. Two of the stories bolted, as it were. The two which occur outside the Pine Mountain Lodge, 'Half-past Eight' and 'Under the I,' a phenomenon which many critics have noted. I still have the piece of paper on which this conception transpired. The initial shock and euphoria must be somewhat analogous to that which people report at unexpected multiple births. The burden, care, feeding and overall development of this unusual family came later. But the form was there from the beginning. I confess—short fiction, linked. Only later did I scrutinize it from every angle and decide that the material would remain in its original form in spite of external pressure to convert it. The modular or linked form satisfied my need for multiple closure within the work, the suggestion of shift work, significant time elapsed between each segment. I did not want transitions, a sense of individual continuity, which is sacrificed to institutional continuity.

"For me, form is not a vessel, a 'kind,' external, an exoskeleton. It is more mammalian, internal, even organic. The stories were separate, isolated, yet together, because for me they reflected the compartmentalization and isolation of elderly individuals within one system, the institution I had set about examining. The form represented a corridor of sorts, and a series of separate rooms, closed rooms. Arla's past, for example, which as David Carpenter said could have been examined in greater depth in a novel, isn't completely presented in this form because institutionalized people (and Arla is one of them by virtue of her existence and function within this particular system) lose their pasts, in one

sense, along with the respect for their individuality. Arla's past is no more significant, then, than her dim apprehension of Miss Moss's past as an English teacher in Prince Edward Island in 'Mid-May's Eldest Child.' Form is related to content for me. When Tessie Bishop and Flora Henderson slip the traces and bolt for the Stampede Parade and the Palliser Hotel, their story bolts the form, goes AWOL as well. I had initially intended this story to be told from within the Lodge with more emphasis/dramatization on the consequences of their escapade, but they escaped. I let them. Worse than that, I went with them. And I'd do it again, regardless of the formal, aesthetic consequences.

"The linked form was suited to the material for another reason—my fascination, obsession, with the vision of *groups* or *individuals* led me naturally to a form which most closely reflected this vision—a group of individual components. This preoccupation in my work is understandable given my involvement in a large extended family and my background in group psychotherapy. It seems to me that there is no reason why groups of stories cannot have a chronological history as well as an ongoing process. This is, in fact, a characteristic inherent and well-recognized in group process, and may legitimately be represented in the form of a group of linked stories. Finally, the whole, as Andreas Schroeder pointed out, would ideally be greater than the sum of its parts."

"Enough gobbledy-gook and psycho-sociological jargon. Get on with the 'subliminal fate' and the 'love'."

"Well, as I said before, it wasn't really a question of fear as much as a trick of fate. I fell in love, if you must know. Passionately, irrevocably in love. I was about fifteen years old, I guess, a vulnerable age as far as love goes—"

"Are you suggesting that your utilization of the linked short fiction form was nothing more than a simple case of arrested adolescence?"

"Maybe," she lowered her head. "No!" She sat bolt upright and I could discern the glimmer of defiance. "No," she repeated and thumped her fist on the plain plywood top of the examiner's table placed before her. She picked up the ballpoint pen I had carelessly left within her reach and began to play with it, rolling it between her palms. But she couldn't fool me with this thinly disguised foreplay. I knew a veiled threat when I saw one. I knew at any moment she might begin to write—probably a short story if left to her own devices and, if worse came to worst, maybe even a sequence of linked titles.

"The fact is," she continued, "I was exposed to the short fiction form—in my view, linked—at a very tender age. I was susceptible. Why beat around the

bush," she wailed. "This all happened at the Saskatchewan Summer School of the Arts, if you insist on extracting every sordid detail. I was too young to know what the consequences would be. But the first collection of stories I ever read was *Dubliners*. I never touched the stuff before that summer, I swear. It just so happened that a novel by the name of *The One Hundred Dollar Misunderstanding* by Richard Glover was very popular that season. I am told it was a steamy little novel about a prostitute and an adolescent boy. Coming of age, loss of innocence, sexual initiation, that sort of thing. The creative writing class was small, mainly older adults. At any rate, Gale Fisher, the creative writing instructor from the English Department at the University of Saskatchewan, had brought this novel with him to the Echo Valley Centre down at the end of the lake.

"They were passing this novel around—but not to me. Gale Fisher had evidently decided I was too young and impressionable at the time and, instead, gave me a copy of Joyce's *Dubliners*. By the third day, even before, by "Araby," the consummation was complete. I was hooked. Furthermore, some years later—again at the Saskatchewan Summer School—I was fed nothing but the finest of the form. Pure. Heady stuff. Faulkner, Munro, Gallant, Laurence, Ross, McCullers, Singer, O'Connor, Borges, Tillie Olsen—" She began to chant, to fall into a trance-like state.

"Enough!" I said, clapping my hands hard and moving the interrogation lamp closer to her chair, thus intensifying the glare. She snapped out of it.

"Jack Hodgins was my supplier that year. You no doubt remember *Spit Delaney's Island*."

"You're turning him in, then?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean I liked it. And Jack wasn't the only one. Jack Hodgins and Rudy Wiebe not only wrote short fiction, they edited anthologies of it, exacerbating its proliferation. And David Carpenter, too. He was in on it. They were all in on it. What happened to me could have happened to anybody."

"And it was all downhill from there?"

"Depending on how you want to look at it. Hey, don't think I haven't had my share of agony, of regret over the years about my addiction to short fiction. Don't think I didn't know that I, too, could have been writing titillating novels with jet-setting protagonists in tropical setting. Many a moonless prairie night found me ransacking my head, weak with contrition, vowing I would mend my ways, go straight—cold turkey, if necessary."

"Hence your third variation on the original title of this paper, I suppose—

'The Chicken Comes Home to Roost'—an open confession of your inability to kick the short fiction habit."

"Yes," she moaned, "yes, yes, yes. You know what Leonard Cohen says—there ain't no cure for love."

"There are some who say you have gone too far, and have thereby deprived the province of its prerequisite number of novels."

"Love! I did it for love!"

"I'll bet they all say that. Here endeth the lesson."

"Hey, wait a minute. Don't you even want to hear my favourite definition of the word 'link'? Link: verb, to join as a link does; unite or connect; to link arms v.i. to be coupled, joined, connected."

I am beginning to believe Leonard Cohen may be right. Perhaps, in certain cases, there is no cure.

Contributors

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While Saskatchewan writing has been flourishing in the past decade or so, little of it has been subjected to real criticism and public evaluation, according to Kenneth G. Probert, editor of this volume. This situation was remedied in part in 1987, when a symposium on Saskatchewan literature was held at Fort San, in the Qu'Appelle Valley, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Saskatchewan School of the Arts. The essays in this book are edited versions of the twenty papers presented at that event.

Many of the symposium participants and observers believed neither that Saskatchewan writing was yet ready for critical scrutiny, nor that it would benefit from criticism; these beliefs were put to rest when it was demonstrated that criticism can be a sympathetic and complementary art.

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